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NEW YORK
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1917

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T

TO

MY FATHER,

WHOSE NOTES AND RECOLLECTIONS
HAVE HELPED ME MATERIALLY,
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK

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THE WAY OF THE WINEPRESS

CHAPTER I

CRIBBERLEY BRIDGE

SO John Marshall is dead; "suddenly," the paper says, "in his eighty-third year," and I have no doubt that the old man went forth into the Unknown without tremor or misgiving. He had been accustomed all his life to sudden calls, and was not of those who worry about the journey that lies in front of them. He took his orders with a nod of understanding and set off.

"For more than forty years the loyal and devoted servant of the late David Middleton, Esq." That is very true, though he showed his devotion in strange ways sometimes, as I remember; and he could be a very outspoken servant when he was a certain side out.

He was Mr. Middleton's coachman, and he formed the first link in my connection with his employer. Now that he is dead it startles me to realise that I owe everything to him ("under God," as Mr. Middleton would have said in stern correction), and none but pleasant memories cluster round the sturdy little man.

How well I remember our first meeting more than thirty years ago. I was a boy of fifteen, the only son of my mother, and she was a widow. She and I had tramped slowly down the stretch of grey highroad until we had

reached the narrow bridge which spanned the sullen waters of the Aire at Cribberley.

It is a wide bridge now, and electric trams have robbed it of its glory, but I shut out that view and see it as I saw it then.

We were both tired, for our bundles were heavy and our feet dragged. My face, I know, was white and girlish, and I had a limp that was not the result of weariness. My mother was hard and strong, with a strength that was not merely physical. Her eyes were grey, and deep lines scored her face, for she had associated with trouble and found the company tolerable.

"Bide a while, Louis," she said, as she let the bundle which she was carrying over her shoulder rest upon the parapet. "I'm a'most dead beat an' you look fit to drop. I wish to goodness we were i' Broadbeck, though the Lord only knows what we're going to do when we get there."

I said nothing, but set my bundle on the footpath and bent over the bridge with my head in my hands. It all comes back to me as I write. I remember how cold the wind was that blew down the river, but in the bright light of that November afternoon every detail in the landscape stood out crisp and clear and the scene fascinated me. Like the bridge, it has lost much of its attractiveness now, for the city has grown fast in recent years and suburban villas dot the crests of the hills, and the smoke from distant factories hangs like a cloud on the horizon; but at that day it was country pure and undefiled.

The river wound lazily through level pastures until it reached the foot of a wooded mound, when it made a sudden twist and was lost to sight. In the distance a belt of trees girdled some lofty hills whose summits had the look of moorland; but the trees were leafless, save here and there where a dab of golden-brown betokened a sturdy resister of

the claims of winter. There was a sense of peace and gentleness which was unfamiliar to one who had been accustomed all his days to nature in her wilder moods, and it was strangely lifeless, except that from some unseen farmyard near by there came at intervals the sharp bark of a dog and the fluttering of frightened fowls.

"Look at those hills, mother," I said after a long pause; "did you ever see such a colour before? They are like blue smoke, and there where they touch the wood it's same as if a bit of green was mixed with it—the sort of green you get in moss; but the blue's lovely."

She turned her head, half-unwillingly, I fear, but she did not see the things I saw, and she replied:

"Nay, I see no blue hills, lad, but I can see blue 'ands an' the tip of a blue nose. If them 'ills is blue it's like enough they're blue wi' cold, same as we are; but how you can see picturs i' your head when t' other end of you must be nigh frozen, an' tired enough to drop off, passes me, I can tell you."

My eyes were fixed on the distant trees. I had forgotten that I was tired and I told her so. Poor mother! she did not understand me, I am sure, for whilst she was practical I was dreamy and sentimental, and though I looked younger than my years I was intellectually much older, as was not unnatural when my chief associates had been men of ripe experience and much thoughtful reading. To the day of her death mother was never quite at her ease with me, though she always loved me and was proud of any success I attained. She could not understand how I had come to be what I was, and looked upon me, I believe, in those early days as something uncanny. She was not so much afraid of me as for me.

"Where that lad gets his ideas from beats all," she muttered; "goodness knows it isn't from me or my side. We'd allus summat else to do nor go about dreaming. He's

beyond me, is t' lad." Then turning to me, she said, "Come, we'd better be stepping."

I laid a detaining hand on her arm. "There's no hurry, is there, mother? It can't be much after four, and Broadbeck isn't so far away now, surely. Rest a bit whilst I look at this a little longer, so that I'll be able to see it all again when I shut my eyes. I shall call for it and it will come like the slave of the ring in *Aladdin*."

I smile now as I recall her reply and its uneasy tone.

"I don't like to hear you talk like that, Louis. It sounds —well, it doesn't sound nat'ral in a young lad. You've got your way to make i' t' world, an' seeing things wi' your eyes shut 'll never 'elp you to make a living. I don't 'old wi' all this day-dreaming; an' seeing picturs i' your inside 'll never keep your inside warm. I wish you'd more colour i' your cheeks i'stead o' so much at back o' your eyes."

I was accustomed to this and made no answer, and after a pause she continued:

"I don't say 'at you can 'elp it, for things is as they're born. Calves seems to be born dreamy-like same as monkeys is born mischievous, an' it's so wi' lads an' lasses; an' I suppose we didn't ought to grumble at what the Lord sends us, for we should be badly off without calves—though what use monkeys is I never could see. All the same, if the Lord had to make you dreamy I wish He 'adn't ha' made you wi' one leg shorter than t' other."

It was an old grievance, and I sighed half-impatiently as I suggested that the Lord had probably nothing to do with it. This was profanity to mother, who replied rather sharply:

"Then if He 'adn't I should like to know who 'ad. You want to be careful, Louis, or you'll be your father over again, allus disputing this an' disbelieving that. Not 'at I'm saying aught agen them 'at's dead 'an gone, but I could never see, an' I never shall, 'at he was right, setting up to

know as much as t' parson an' t' schoolmaster, an' all us trying to hatch some new idea out o' t' Bible. An' what good it did I never could make out, not to name 'at it made him ill-tempered at times. All t' same," she continued, picking up the threads of her argument, "your father 'adn't a short leg an' I'm sure I haven't, so if the Lord didn't give it you, who did?"

"I don't know," I said. "Dad said I got my eyes from his grandfather. Perhaps I got my short leg from him too."

There was again the note of vague uneasiness in mother's voice as she replied:

"Eh, Louis, I'm saying naught agen your poor father, but I doubt he'll never be dead while you live; an' I could ha' wished you'd ha' taken more after your mother's side, for what did your father make out o' life? What has 'e left us, after all his toiling an' moiling, an' book-reading an' argy-fying, but these two bits o' bundles? But as for short legs, there hasn't been one either o' his side or mine 'at had aught o' t' sort, as far back as I can go. My people, thank goodness, was allus straight-limbed an' proper-made, an' if your father's folk was only a sickly-looking lot, there was none of 'em limped. Though now I come to think on it your great-uncle Edwin had a stutter 'at might 'appen be called a limp in 'is talk, but that's all 'at I can call to mind."

As she spoke the sun dropped behind a cloud and in a moment the warm golden glow was wiped out as with the sweep of a sponge, and the landscape became grey and cold. I suddenly realised that I was cold, too, and I stooped to pick up my bundle.

"How far do you think it is to Broadbeck, mother?" I asked wearily.

"Goodness knows," she replied; "but p'raps this gentleman can tell us: I'll go an' see."

The "gentleman" was a coachman who had just driven up to the bridge, and was now in the act of backing the horse

and carriage into a narrow lane that ran at right angles to the roadway and parallel with the river. He was a well-knit little man, getting on in years in my boyish eyes, dressed in a groom's costume of light-brown "mixture," with a stand-up collar and stiff, cross-over white tie; and a round felt hat was pushed well on to his head.

The carriage—a victoria—was presentable rather than smart, but the bay mare was well fed and well groomed and apparently well satisfied with her circumstances.

Mother waited until the groom turned his head in our direction, and then asked the unfortunate question how long it would take us to get to Broadbeck. Again I smile as I see the man throw a rug over the mare's back and draw a pipe from his waistcoat pocket. It was all so deliberate and so characteristic of John Marshall. He applied a light and gave a few careful puffs before he replied:

"Now how the hangment can I tell you that? 'How long will it take us?' That's a woman to naught: just t' sort of a silly question nob'dy but a woman 'ud ask. As if I can tell you how long it'll take, when by t' look of you you might end your days on t' road. They cap me, do women."

Mother turned away impatiently, but on second thoughts faced him again and said with a show of spirit:

"If I wasn't that tired 'at my tongue's fair dry I'd tell you what I think o' you men 'at can't give a civil answer to a civil question. I don't know why the Lord makes so many aggeravating men unless it's for a punishment for us going wrong at t' start. But it's waste o' time talking to you. Time 'll tell us if you won't. Come on, Louis."

Her words and weariness struck home.

"Nay, missus," he replied, rather shamefacedly, "I'm not one for aggeravating folk, not me. If you'd ha' asked me how far it is into Broadbeck I should ha' told you it was five mile by t' stone a few yards up t' road; but if you ask me how long it'll take you to tramp them five mile I give it up."

"Well, thank you for that much," mother replied. "I suppose you can't 'elp plaguing folks; lots o' men can't, an' it passes for cleverness. If I hadn't ha' been so tired I might ha' thought it funny, but when you're a'most at t' far end little things upsets you."

The man strolled up to the footpath. "Them bundles are none so light, I daresay," he said.

"They'll be pounds 'eavier afore we get them five mile covered," mother answered; "but looking at 'em won't make 'em any lighter. Come, Louis."

"You might get a lift on a dray, happen," said the man. "A copper or two 'ud go a long way."

"Coppers isn't found in t' gutters," mother replied, as we moved along.

What happened after we had gone Marshall was never tired of relating to me in the years that followed. He would puff away at his pipe and chuckle quietly at his recollections, and his story was always prefaced with the self-satisfied observation, "You see, I knew my man. If I hadn't known David Middleton after all them years I should ha' deserved to be flogged."

He sat, he said, upon the wall, smoking his short pipe until he saw his master round the bend in the lane, when he put the pipe into his pocket, and walking across the road drew the carriage on to the highway.

"I'm two minutes behind time, Marshall," said Mr. Middleton, as he came up and put his foot on the step. "What are you letting the seat down for?"

The carriage was made for two, but a third could be accommodated at a pinch on a seat that closed into the framework behind the driver.

"To save putting it down later on," replied Marshall. "There's a couple o' friends o' yours a few hundred yards up t' road that you'll be giving a lift to."

"Push the seat back. When I want it down I'll tell you. What friends are they?"

"Friends in need," replied Marshall, in no way disconcerted by his rebuff. "Tramps, just dog-tired, with a heavy bundle apiece. I've put t' apron on t' box seat to hide t' bundles."

I fear he was deliberately mysterious and provocative. He always revelled in a situation of that kind and feasted on the memory for many a day.

"Oh, have you? Confound your impudence, Marshall!" said his master with sudden irritation. "You take far too much on yourself. I ll ask you to choose my passengers when I've got past choosing my own, and it hasn't come to that yet. What sort of lazy beggars are they who've been bribing you to make an ambulance of my carriage?"

Marshall had sown the wind, but the whirlwind that he reaped lashed him and made him sore. He climbed up to his seat and took the reins.

"The mare's stood long enough, sir," he said sourly.

"She isn't your mare; she'll stand my time. I asked what sort of people these tramps are."

"Better sort than lots you pick up," returned Marshall, "an' all I got from 'em was a 'thank-you' for telling 'em how far they had to walk."

"Do they look like men who work?"

"No, they don't, an' for a good reason. One of 'em's a woman, an' the other's a lad, an' he's either lame or blistered o' one foot. You'll see 'em for yourself in a minute. Are we to be going?"

"Go on, then, and don't pull up unless I tell you to."

I know exactly how each man felt and looked. Mr. Middleton would lean back in his carriage without any show of resentment at his servant's familiarity—rather pleased indeed at the subtle compliment that had been paid to his benevolence, and more than pleased that he had got the best of the encounter and disturbed his coachman's composure.

Marshall, smarting a little at his master's insinuation, would tighten his lips and await the result that should justify his interference. There was perfect understanding between them; and before many months had gone by I had found that freedom of this kind, as between master and servant, was common enough in the West Riding of Yorkshire.

CHAPTER II

MR. MIDDLETON ACTS THE PART OF PROVIDENCE

WE had not got more than half-way up the hill when the carriage passed us. It was not simply that we were tired and the bundles heavy, but the view beyond the low wall and across the valley made constant appeals to me and caused me to loiter, and my mother was too indulgent to hasten my steps.

The blue of the distant hills was lost in the murk of approaching night, and lights from hitherto unsuspected dwellings were beginning to glimmer amid the trees, denoting to my imagination so many lanterns held by hidden genii of the wood.

Below, the river, even at that day dirty and unattractive, had borrowed for awhile the cool steel tints of the sky and lay like a narrow scarf upon the dusky bosom of the fields. I was so absorbed by it all that only mother's watchfulness preserved me from bruising hands or knees when the rough wall curved upon the pathway.

We were prepared to bestow a nod of friendly recognition on the driver as the carriage passed, but Marshall was staring straight in front of him as if unconscious of our presence. I was glancing half-shyly at the occupant of the carriage, who had bent a keen, scrutinising gaze upon us both, when to my astonishment he jumped out without stopping the horse.

He was a little in front of us and he waited on the footpath until we came up, when he held out his hand towards me. "Let's feel the weight of that bundle, my lad," he said.

I hesitated, but only for a moment. There was something about the man that compelled obedience, and I handed my burden over to him. I think I smiled.

"Umph! I'd rather carry it one mile than ten," he remarked. Then shifting it into his left hand he removed mother's bundle from her shoulder without ado and stepped on to the roadway. "That is equipoise, my lad," he said, smiling.

He was a man slightly past his prime—as a matter of fact I found later that he was fifty-five—and stood nearly six feet. Weighted as he was with the bundles, he yet held himself straight and walked with an easy swing in which those who are quick to read signs would no doubt have seen indications of an impulsive and independent spirit; whilst the deep jaw, compressed lips, and contracted eyebrows spoke equally plainly of resoluteness that might easily become obstinacy. I was too young and inexperienced to realise this at the time, of course, though I got some inkling of it. His beard and moustache were turning grey and the hair grew thickly above his eyes, which were long and narrow.

I grew to like those eyes, for merriment, if not mischief, lay upon the surface, and tenderness and emotion lurked in the depths. They could be hard enough on occasion, however, as many men knew to their cost.

As he had a carriage it was natural to conclude that he was well-to-do, but, boy that I was, I could not fail to notice that his dress was shabby. Even in the dim light I could see that his hat and his tie were alike old; that the velvet collar of his black overcoat had lost its pile all round the neck; and that his dark-grey trousers, carelessly turned up at the bottom, were frayed where the heel touched them.

I grew accustomed to this before long, for I found that David Middleton was not the only wealthy Broadbeck merchant who was indifferent to his personal appearance.

I had not learned then that rich men can afford to be shabby, which is a luxury denied to the impecunious.

I must get back, however, to the highroad. Surprise had robbed mother of speech, and "equipoise" puzzled her. The kindness of the act touched her heart, but there came also a sense of shame which I can understand.

She stammered out a protest and would have taken the bundles back, but Mr. Middleton checked her. "We are told to bear one another's burdens," he laughed.

"But it doesn't mean this sort—bundles and things," I ventured. "It means worries and troubles, doesn't it?"

"Oh, ho! young theologian; so you are an authority on Scripture, are you? What do they call you—Paul?"

My chance remark—a question really—had done me a great service. Nothing that I might have done or said could have predisposed Mr. Middleton more in my favour. I was abashed, however, and mother replied:

"No, sir, we call him Louis after his grandfather, though I could have liked to call him by a Bible name, me being called Rachel—Rachel Turner—myself. But his father was dead set on Louis, an' it's no use crossing men if you can help it, begging your pardon, sir, for making so bold; but I allus think 'at Bible names is more lucky."

Mother was not really garrulous, but her constant fear that I should say something dangerous or unacceptable led her to spread the wings of volubility in an attempt to screen me, I suppose. Her use of the word "lucky" proved unfortunate.

"Oh, do you? Then tell me this, Rachel Turner—are you lucky in having him for a son or is he unlucky in having you for a mother?"

This was too subtle for mother, and I came to her relief. My schoolmaster had come of puritan stock—that explains what may seem like priggishness.

"I don't believe in luck," I said.

"Hold your tongue, Louis," said mother in a sharp admonitory aside; "with your 'believes' and 'don't believes.'" Then in an apologetic tone to Mr. Middleton, "I'm sure, sir, he hasn't got his forradness from me. He might be five-an'-twenty i'stead o' just fifteen; but he's his father's spitten image—inside an' outside, as you might say—an' he's that queer in his thoughts 'at he sometimes gives me quite a turn. He doesn't believe in luck, he says, and him unlucky enough to have one leg shorter than t' other."

I looked up smiling into Mr. Middleton's face and he laughed but said nothing, for we had reached the top of the hill and the carriage was waiting. The bundles were handed to Marshall, who stowed them away sulkily, and Mr. Middleton then bade mother get in and sit on the far side. He showed me how to pull down the little seat in front and indicated that it was for my use.

Mother held back, but our benefactor was peremptory. "Get in," he repeated, with an impatient toss of the head, "and let me tell you that I agree with Louis that there's no such thing as luck."

Mother made no further protest, but got in and sat awkwardly on the edge of the seat until Mr. Middleton commanded her to be comfortable, and a minute or two elapsed before she said, boldly for her:

"Well, sir, whether you believe i' luck or no, I do, meaning no disrespect; for if this isn't luck for me an' Louis I don't know what is; but I thank you very kindly, though I doubt you'll be ashamed o' riding wi' the likes of us."

A curious smile appeared at the corners of Mr. Middleton's mouth. "Don't *you* call this luck, Louis?" he asked.

Perhaps in my heart I did, but I shook my head, and when he asked me, "What, then?" gave the answer I had been taught:

"Providence."

"What's the difference?"

I hesitated, collecting my thoughts. "I'm not sure that I can explain. I think Providence sees—and plans."

Mr. Middleton leaned forward and put a hand on my knee. The pressure told me that he was pleased. "Spell it with a G, Louis—a capital G," he said; and I smiled, understanding.

After that I was left to myself whilst mother told our new friend our story. I was interested in the keen questions he put to her, but she had nothing to conceal, and the tale was straightforward enough.

I was a baby when my parents had left Broadbeck and taken up their abode in the remote fell district of Innershaw, where father earned a precarious livelihood as carpenter and odd man. He had been country-born and had felt smothered in the town, but I can see now that it was thoughtless if not cruel to take a town-bred wife to such a lonely spot, where the wild and boggy moors were a poor substitute for the busy streets to which she had been accustomed.

Father liked it, however, and books and one or two congenial souls were for him sufficient company. I grew up to like the books, the gruff schoolmaster, and the kindly vicar—an old, old man, as his long grey hairs and uncertain steps led me to believe, though I know better now—but the rolling stretch of moor, so desolate, apparently so endless, oppressed me and made me old.

Father did not grow robust, either, and during a twelvemonth's sickness the little he had saved went in food and medicine, so that when he knew himself "booked for the long journey," as mother put it, his thoughts turned to our future and he made mother promise that she would go back to Broadbeck—to her own people. Mother smiled a little bitterly, I remember, for who were "her own people" now,

after fourteen years, and neither relative nor friend left, so far as she knew?

I had been growing drowsy as the narrative proceeded, but I remember the weary tone in which mother concluded:

"So when we'd put him away we set off, an' we've tramped every stitch o' t' road, an' the Lord only knows what we're going to do when we get there. But I'm not one to fret. When I've rested an odd day I shall find work somewhere, for I'm strong an' willing, thank God, an' this lift you've given us has been a nice 'elp. But if you please we'll get down now, sir, for folks is staring at us, an' we shouldn't like to shame you."

I heard Mr. Middleton say that his skin was too thick to be hurt by a stare, and that hers ought to be; and then I fell fast asleep. I know, however, what followed, though weeks passed before mother told me all.

Mr. Middleton began his inquiry into our plans by suggesting that mother might seek temporary shelter in the workhouse; and when this was negatived with alarmed emphasis he demanded to know how much money she possessed. Mother hesitated, glancing across at me, but Mr. Middleton was not to be denied, and she acknowledged that she had a few coppers short of eighteen shillings—enough for present needs, at any rate.

Mr. Middleton consulted his boots for a few minutes and came to a prompt decision. It was characteristic of him that he did not think it necessary to submit his scheme for approval.

"Marshall," he said sharply, "go forward into Broadbeck and drive up Sidney Street as far as Nicholson's Court. Then you can go down to the warehouse and wait for me."

He turned to mother and said, "I've found lodgings for you. They're in one of the worst courts in Broadbeck, but they're as clean as my own home. The girl who lives there is about Louis' age, but hard as nails and with the spirit of a

tigress. They call her Victoria Smith, and she's alone in the world. You'll be a godsend to each other; so that's settled."

Mother looked at him in astonishment, but she was grateful to this masterful man whose arrangement had put an end to the present anxiety; and she instinctively felt he could be trusted. She thanked our benefactor as warmly as her nature permitted, and was less disposed than ever to question the reality of luck.

We were now nearing the centre of the town, and the noise of the traffic woke me. I looked around with interest. It was not an exhilarating sight.

"Is this Broadbeck?" I asked. "How dirty the buildings are; they are as black as the streets themselves."

"There is gold in that dirt, my boy," was the dry reply.

I reflected for a while and then said:

"I suppose you mean it is the kind of work they do in the town that makes everything so black and smoky; and that work means money. But it seems a pity to have so much dirt, even if there is gold in it."

"And much of the gold is dirty," continued Mr. Middleton, looking straight into my eyes as if to read the soul behind them.

My brain busied itself with the metaphor.

"You mean that it is not got honestly?" I hazarded.

"Just that."

"Then perhaps that is why everything turns black," I commented reflectively. "It seems a pity."

Mr. Middleton stared at me, then laughed. "You're a rum lad," he said.

CHAPTER III

NICHOLSON'S COURT

WHEN I look back to-day upon Nicholson's Court it seems so remote and shadowy that I could almost think it belonged to another existence. There is a sense in which it does—at any rate when I left it I felt as the butterfly may feel when it contemplates the pupa husk from which it has freed itself. All the same there are pleasant recollections connected with that wretched court.

My heart sank when we passed through the entry—dark as a tunnel—and I saw the kind of house to which Mr. Middleton was conducting us. By the light of a solitary lamp I could discern broken window-panes, stuffed with rags, and behind them slatternly women whose loud voices were raised in ceaseless chiding of unkempt and unruly children. Even inexperience might know that we were in one of the poorest and lowest neighbourhoods of the town; but when we had climbed half a dozen steps and entered the room which was to be our temporary home my spirits revived.

The girl who turned round in astonishment at our unceremonious entrance was huddled on the hearth before a scanty fire, mending a stocking. She was dressed in black, which accentuated the pallor of her face; and the moment I saw her I knew we should be welcome.

Mr. Middleton wasted neither time nor words in explaining the situation, and before ten minutes had elapsed all the necessary arrangements had been made—not discussed—

and we were left alone with our hostess, Victoria Smith, who was, as she informed us, "going in fourteen."

I will not dwell upon the details of that evening—I was in truth too tired to take much note of them—but I must say something about the girl into whose company I had been thrown and who knew no more than I what an extraordinary turn the Wheel of Fortune had taken for us both that day.

Mr. Middleton had made the acquaintance of her family four years before, when another sister had shared with Victoria such advantages as may lie in the possession of a brutal father and a drunken mother. The elder girl died, however, on the night of Mr. Middleton's first visit, and the mother also died a few weeks later in hospital as the result of a public-house brawl in which she had taken a leading part. The father had been the terror of the court up to that time, but after his child's death he had fits of reformation, and he gave up thrashing Victoria and even began to pay rent for the wretched cellar which was their home. When two years had gone by they removed to the rooms on the floor above, for Victoria was then earning money at Mr. Middleton's warehouse, and her father was willing to spare an occasional shilling to help the housekeeping. Just when further reformation seemed probable the man had a seizure of some kind, and he had been buried on the morning of the day that we made our appearance.

Mr. Middleton had well said that the girl had the spirit of a tigress, but she had also a very affectionate nature, and she became my champion and a loyal daughter to her adopted mother from that first evening. One picture of the tigress must suffice. I ought to explain that she had never forgiven her parents for calling her Victoria, and I hardly wonder at it, in view of all the suffering it had entailed.

It was Saturday afternoon. After a fortnight's residence I had become well acquainted with our youthful neighbours,

and a rough lot they were. A dozen of them, of both sexes, but mostly boys, were gathered round Victoria, who was seated on a high tub with her back to the wall that closed in the farther end of the court. The girl's hands were clasped round her knees and she was striving her hardest to appear unconcerned, though the tormentors who stood before her were determined to provoke her.

"Don't yer worry 'Er Majesty, Sandy Mac, or she'll 'ave yer strung up by the neck wi' a new rope. Don't you see as 'ow she's sat on 'er throne, waitin' for 'er lord-dukes to bend down an' kiss 'er feet?"

Jimmy Drummond, better known as "Bluster," was a little hazy in his ideas of Court procedure, but his audience was not critical; neither was it better informed.

"Ger away wi' ye, Bluster," interrupted Sandy Mac, who was the only one of the company who dared reply to that formidable youth with such familiarity; and who did so in virtue of a superiority of a quarter of an inch in height, as accurately measured on the side of the pump, and duly attested by the initials of witnesses. "Ger away wi' ye. I've just called in at Buck'nam Palis as I 'appened to be passin' to ask after 'Er Royal 'Ighness's 'ealth an' sperrits; which is only middlin', 'avin eat too much baked 'taters."

Derisive laughter greeted this attempt at wit, and Sandy Mac grew elated with his success.

"When ye've quite finished yer applause, genelmen, we'll reshume where we left off. The 'ousemaid what answered the bell said as 'ow five doctors 'ad been sittin' up with 'Er Majesty, an' 'ad made a posmorten exam'nation, an' found 'at the taters was stoppin' up 'er breathin' ap-p'ratus, an' they rec'mended lamp oil three times a day."

"It's lock-jaw 'at 'Er Majesty's got, wi' yer taters," said Bluster, who thought he had waited long enough for his turn and had been revolving an opposition theory. "Can't yer see as 'ow she 'as 'er teeth that tight 'at she can scarce

breathe? Let's get a chisil an' break in afore she chokes."

"'Asn't she got a nose to breathe wi', ye John Isaac?" replied Sandy Mac with considerable contempt. "See 'ow 'igh she lifts it, so as to get 'er air as fresh as poss'ble. They goes black in the face when they chokes, same as old Murphy in our lodgin'-'ouse what swallered a fish-bone; an' 'Er Majesty 's as white as chalk. Look at 'er!"

The injunction was unnecessary. The whole group had been looking at her for the last ten minutes, and awaited events.

Victoria was holding her head on one side, and her half-closed eyes, expressive of contempt, were fixed on the roofs of the houses opposite; but she saw all that was passing, and her compressed lips indicated the effort she was making to control her tongue and temper. She did not underestimate the strength of the foe, but she was not afraid of it: she was afraid only of herself. She knew that silence was her best policy, and she experienced satisfaction in knowing that it irritated and disconcerted her tormentors; so she remained passive and bided her time.

"I 'opes yer Majesty won't kick the bucket afore ye've made me into a dook," continued Sandy Mac, directly addressing the lady on the throne; "'cos I'm losin' sleep wi' thinkin' about it. I guess yer 'Ighness knows 'at I'm boss o' this 'ere crew, so it's naught but right 'at ye should make me into a lord. So I kneels to yer Goodness Graciousness, please yer Majesty."

Sandy suited the action to the word and knelt on one knee before the throne. Perhaps from a mistaken conception of court etiquette he put his hands together and closed his eyes, which was a tactical blunder unworthy of Sandy, and of which Victoria was quick to take advantage.

Without lowering her eyes she gently extended the foot which was in line with Sandy's chest and pushed him over

into one of the pools for which Nicholson's Court was notorious. The splash which followed caused loud laughter, and I could not forbear exclaiming:

"That's the Order of the Bath, Sandy!"

Sandy Mac, who felt that he had lost at a stroke all the advantages which his wit had gained him, was quick to vent his wrath on me.

"I'll bath yer, ye limpin' lunatic!" he shouted, as he pushed the others aside and strode in my direction. I made no attempt to escape, and I know my heart beat quickly when I felt Sandy's hand on my shoulder; but at the same instant he was pulled from me and flung against the wall a couple of yards away.

Victoria had risen in her wrath and now stood with clenched fists and blazing eyes between us; but even yet she did not speak. She just faced the doubly discredited hero of Nicholson's Court and defied him with her eye.

To do him justice, Sandy was not afraid, but her silence was disconcerting. He therefore temporised by telling his opponent, after the example of Goliath of Gath, what he proposed to do to her.

"Oh, very well, Vicky Smith," he said slowly, as he removed his coat; "I'm goin' to give you an' Limpin' Luny the jolliest lickin' ye've ever 'ad in yer lives. I'll paint picters on yer ugly mugs afore I've finished wi' ye. I'll show ye—both of ye—whether ye'll knock me over into puddles an' make faces at me; so ye can put that in yer pipe an' smoke it, Vicky Smith!" Sandy had lost all reverence for the throne and was now a rebel of the first order.

Victoria smiled. It was not a pleasant smile and she knew it. It was the sort of smile that is calculated to hurt the feelings of sensitive fighting boys, and which says to bystanders as plainly as spoken words, "Brag and bounce, my friends: sound and fury signifying nothing; take no notice of it."

Sandy interpreted it thus and his anger grew hotter. "All right, my lass," he shouted, "ye may grin, but it's beans you and yer sweet'eart is goin' to get, so I tell ye straight.' I'll make 'im lamer nor ever, an' I'll make you as lame as 'im!" He had doubled up his sleeves and now advanced cautiously towards Victoria; but I stepped between them.

"So it's to be both of ye at once, is it?" said Sandy. "All right; I'm game. Come on wi' ye."

But Victoria would have none of it. "Now then, Louis Turner," she said, "this is my business, an' I'm quite able to manage it. You'll just get upstairs into t' 'ouse out o' t' way while I give Sandy a receipt for 'is promises. I'll come in when 'e's finished wi' me, so off ye go. If you don't I'll carry you, an' if anyone offers to touch you I'll——"

She left the sentence unfinished, but her audience appeared to have no difficulty in filling in the hiatus. Sandy Mac waxed sarcastic.

"Oh, it's wonders ye'll do, no doubt, Vicky Smith, an' we're all feared for our lives. I'm shiverin' an' shakin' myself. But for all that you an' yer white-faced pal is goin' to be made into sossige-meat afore 'e goes inside, so 'ere goes." And Sandy made a sudden dart past Victoria and gave me a push with his foot that sent me full length upon the ground.

"You low cad!" said Victoria between her teeth. "You mean coward, to touch a lame lad like 'im! Now I'll just pay you for that bit o' business an' learn ye better manners." And regardless of the blows from his clenched fists, Victoria seized her antagonist by the neck of his shirt and gave him a smack upon the face with all her strength, whilst the fickle and delighted onlookers held their breath in anticipation of a battle royal.

And a battle royal it was that followed: I have no doubt

it is a tradition of the court to this day. I endeavoured to interfere in vain. I was held back by Bluster, who informed me for my comfort that there was "no call for thee to get thysen 'urten," and Vicky Smith would "manige a sight better" without my interference.

In spite of his threats I thought Sandy had at first some compunction about really hurting a girl, but that stinging blow upon the cheek served to remove his scruples, and with an angry exclamation he rushed on his opponent and rained blow after blow upon her with great rapidity.

Victoria's spirits rose as the battle proceeded. It was quite like old times, and reminded her—as she told me later—of the unregenerate days when she had fought and thrashed the boys of the court, and when, to balance matters, her parents had thrashed her.

Under Mr. Middleton's influence she had resisted the devil valiantly, but was overjoyed to feel that the limit of self-restraint had been reached and that the higher powers who are always so exacting had opened the gates of the forbidden jousting-ground. She was tough as leather and every nerve in her body strained to the encounter. She scarcely felt, in the joy of battle, the blows which Sandy bestowed on any exposed part of her body.

She was slightly taller than her assailant and so was able to guard her face fairly well, and she had the advantage of coolness. Whilst he punctuated his deliveries with the superfluous advice to "take that!" together with sundry epithets intended to indicate the opinion he had formed of his antagonist's character, she kept her lips firmly closed and her elbows squared, and delivered her blows only when she saw an effective opening.

By and bye Sandy's attack began to weaken, and simultaneously his tone became less aggressive and more interrogative.

"Ye'll pay me, will ye, my leddie? Ye'll learn me

manners, will ye? 'Ow do ye like me learnin' you manners, eh? P'raps ye've 'ad enough for one time, eh, yer 'Ighness?"

Sandy's lip was bleeding and there was a decided swelling over one eye, so that he could not claim all the honours of war; and the suggested cessation of hostilities was not quite free from suspicion.

Victoria smiled, and again the smile was dangerous. "When you've quite finished, Sandy, we'll resume," she quoted, to the vast enjoyment of the crowd. "I've been playin' wi' ye all this time; I've been lettin' you 'ave your turn, but now I'm goin' to 'ave mine, an' I'll thrash ye for the good of your soul, an' to learn ye not to touch lame lads agen."

Bearing down all his defences she seized Sandy's head and by sheer muscular strength bent it beneath her left arm. Then, magnanimous in victory, whilst the humiliated foe kicked desperately at her legs and wriggled hard to set himself free, she gave three blows to the most prominent part of Sandy's face and sent another red streak to join the one from his lips.

"Now ye can go, bully Sandy," she ejaculated; "an' if it 'adn't been 'at I've turned over a new leaf I'd 'ave 'urt you afore I'd finished wi' ye; but I've just done this for yer good. Oh, ye needn't throw yer bad langwidge at me, 'cos 'ard words breaks no bones. If ye 'appen to be in t' neighb'rood of Buck'nam Palace on yer way 'ome ye can call an' tell the 'ousemaid to let one o' the five doctors 'tend to yer bruises."

Humorously scornful, Victoria turned, and we went up the worn steps into the house.

That was the tigress side of her nature, and the picture is essential to a proper appreciation of what she was and what she became.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT RESOLUTION

THAT same evening we formed what came to be called the Great Resolution. The day had brought forth greater excitement than I had ever known before, but the evening was big with the promise of cataclysmic happenings.

I was at an impressionable age, romantic as well as sentimental, and I found in Victoria the qualities I lacked. Needless to say, I fell promptly in love with her, and was very thorough in my boyish love-making. Victoria took it patiently, as a curious, uncommon, and at times inconvenient experience. Although younger than I she was an inch taller and already a woman in experience. Girls ripen fast in a neighbourhood like that in which she lived; and, so far as my observation went, prudery and sentimentality never entered the court except as visitors. Victoria hardly understood what the terms meant.

I suppose my weakness appealed to the mother in her. At any rate she constituted herself my protectress from the first day and shielded me from the rude affronts of neighbours in whose eyes brutality ranked as a virtue, and deformity as a fit object of ridicule.

On this occasion my champion had not emerged scathless from the jousting-ground. Her upper lip was swollen and bleeding, and the hair which had fallen over her face was scarcely blacker than the bruise that disfigured her eye. These gifts of Sandy did not add to the attractiveness

of her appearance, and even the nimbus with which my admiration surrounded her could not conceal these blemishes. The pitying tone which accompanied my condolences was wasted on Victoria.

"I'm so plain to start with 'at it won't make much diff'rence," she said, surveying her features in the glass that hung near what she called the "slop-stone"; "an' there's parts of me 'at you can't see 'at's worse than these."

She bent over the sink and plunged her face into cold water, then washed her hands and made preparations for tea.

Mother was spending the afternoon and evening with an acquaintance of the olden days, so I was called upon to help.

"I'm awfully proud of you, Vic," I said, as she set out the pots upon the table; "I'd do anything I could for you."

"Do some toast then," said the practical young woman, "an' see you don't burn it, as you will do if you keep yer eyes on me."

I did burn it, I remember, and Victoria grumbled at the waste, and I complained that she was too severe on a fellow's little mistakes, and protested that I was afraid of her.

"It wasn't a mistake," she replied; "it was naught but carelessness 'cos you didn't watch it. You were watchin' me i'stead o' t' bread."

"I couldn't help it," I said. "You see, Vic, you fought for me and——"

"Don't be a silly!" she interrupted.

It was a barely-furnished room, but it looked cheerful in the firelight. A few cheap prints and almanacks had been nailed upon the walls, and some strips of carpet partially covered the floor. Two mugs and two plates

stood upon the bare boards of the well-scrubbed deal table, and we fared sumptuously on thick slices of bread and jam, with buttered toast for the final delicacy, and weak tea well sugared.

When the washing-up was over we settled down to an evening of enjoyment. Victoria sat in the arm-chair with her feet on the fender and I on the stool with my hands clasped round my knees.

"Now," said Victoria, "we'll 'ave some more of the book. We'll begin at the beginnin' again, an' I'll try to understand it; an' I vote we don't go on till I do understand it. You'll 'ave to 'elp me."

"But I don't understand it very well myself," I explained.

"Then we'll 'elp one another," she said; "we'll ferret it out someway, never fear."

I went to a drawer in the dresser and brought out a book covered with brown paper and wrapped carefully in a newspaper. It was one of five precious volumes which I had been grudgingly allowed to include in my bundle, and mother never knew how often the thought of them had lightened the load as I tramped along. The one I now produced was my old schoolmaster's parting gift—his own well-thumbed copy of *Sesame and Lilies*, and I treasured it the more because of the thumb-marks. I knew it had cost the old man something to part with it.

This was thirty years ago, remember, and Ruskin was not among the "back-numbers," but a name to conjure with. To me he was something more than human; and though I smile now as I see myself opening the book so reverently, I am old-fashioned enough to sympathise too.

I read the first few pages with great deliberation, halting at the hard and unfamiliar words and attempting to puzzle out their meaning. We had no dictionary, so

we had to rely on our native wit, digging out the sense from the context; but this was no drawback.

I explained the drift of it, as I had understood it from the schoolmaster. There was treasure hidden in books: treasure that might be found, treasure that it was good to have for its own sake.

"Let's stop an' talk now," said Victoria, when I had read and re-read the first eight paragraphs. "Do you believe all 'e says?"

"Rather!" I replied, with all the enthusiasm of the young disciple. "Only I don't see how I'm going to make much out now with nobody to help me. You see, I'm not clever."

"I'll 'elp ye," said Victoria, leaning forward and looking at me earnestly.

I put my hand on hers affectionately and smiled. "Dear old Vic, I'm sure you would if you could, but you see, you haven't had as good a chance as me, and . . . and . . . you need somebody to help you 'at knows more than yourself."

Victoria compressed her brow. "That's right enough in a way, but I've said I'll 'elp you an' I will. It says the treasure's hid in books, not in clever men. Then we'll dig it out o' books, a bit at a time. There's free libr'ies, isn't there? We'll just find that treasure together, you an' me. It'll be grand."

"Vic, you're a champion; but you couldn't keep it up. You've spirit enough, but—I don't know how to say it. You see . . . you're like mother . . . you speak broad Yorkshire, and . . . and——"

The girl nodded. "I know. Don't be frightened of sayin' it right out. Just you tell me what I do an' don't do. I want to know. Go on!" She gave my arm a little nudge and then tightened her hand upon mine.

"You won't be hurt?" I queried anxiously.

"No, you silly! I aren't a soft 'ead," she answered.

"Well, you know, Vic, I make heaps of mistakes myself, besides letting the toast burn; but in grammar and that sort of thing you make lots. You don't put your 'h's' in, and you leave out your 'g's' at the end of words . . . and, oh, I don't know, I can't tell you, Vic. It isn't your fault; it's the way you've been brought up."

Victoria rose to her feet and laughed.

"Now look you here, Louis," she said, speaking carefully and very deliberately; "there's one mistake you've got to give over makin'—I mean making. You're too ready to say 'I can't help it.' I can help it, and so can you. Why do I speak wrong? I'll tell you—habit! I 'aven't wanted to speak right. But I know I speak wrong. I've been to school like every other girl, and I can speak better when I try. And school or no school, home or no home, it seems to me we bring ourselves up, and I just 'aven't bothered. But I said I'll help you and I will; and I said we'd seek that treasure and find it, and we will, you and me together."

I had risen to my feet also, and now stood facing her. I imagine my tone was that of the men with whom I had mixed. There was admiration in it: something of hope and more of doubt.

"Victoria, you're a brick; and if any girl could do it you could. But here, in Nicholson's Court, and with only me to help you——"

"Here in Nicholson's Court or anywhere else. With you to help me or without you. I've said I will and I *will*. You may go back, but I won't. If that treasure's to be found I'll find it; see if I don't. I shall make a deal o' mistakes at first, because I don't know any better —every kid falls when it first tries to walk—but I'll improve myself every day 'at I live; I will. I'll put in

all my 'h's,' at any rate, and have a good try for the 'g's'; and before long I'll talk as well as a schoolmissis, so help me God!"

It was late when mother returned, but she detected a difference in Victoria's speech even before she noticed the disfigurement of the girl's face.

"There's summat curious about t' way you're talking, lass," she said. "What ails you 'at you're so slow? I could a'most think it was our Louis."

Victoria shot a glance at me and replied enigmatically:

"I've begun to dig for treasure, an' this is t' first spadeful."

Mother stared at her and saw the bruises.

"Whatever. . . ! Who in the world's been knocking you about, lass? You might well ram'le. Here, pass us t' candle an' we'll get upstairs to bed. You'll feel better i' t' morning."

CHAPTER V

D. & D. MIDDLETONS' WAREHOUSE

THE main business quarter of Broadbeck, as distinguished from the shopping district, is small and fairly compact. The meaner buildings are huddled together on a triangular plot of land in the centre of the town and are almost painfully plain; indeed they are so ugly that one can only conclude that art and architects were not on speaking terms at the time of their erection; and the streets which give access to them are narrow and therefore crowded during the greater part of the day.

Outside this sordid area there are a few wider streets, flanked by lofty buildings that are more worthy of a prosperous industrial town. Here you may find spacious, well-lighted entrance halls, and broad stairways that are handsome and even imposing, and the rooms to which they conduct are often like them. One characteristic is common to both styles of building—their exteriors are uniformly black with the grime that betokens gold.

Mr. Middleton was a spinner and manufacturer, and his town warehouse, while not one of the largest or most palatial, was as solidly built as any, and boasted some massive decoration. Its owner was particular about its appearance; the windows, the brass fittings upon the doors, and the polished doors themselves were not only clean but lustrous; and the tiled entrance hall and stone steps were always as free from dirt as circumstances

permitted. It was part of Victoria's duties to wage war with these circumstances.

To reach Mr. Middleton's private office you had to pass through the counting-house, where half a dozen clerks sat on high stools under the immediate supervision of the cashier, and within earshot of the chief himself. The rooms where the piece goods were stored, examined, "made-up," and packed for despatch were behind and above the offices, and were just as clean and well ordered as the more public apartments. Mr. Middleton believed that "cleanliness is next to godliness," and he lived up to his creed.

It took me some time to discover that my employer had never been a keen business man, though I found out soon enough that he thought himself such. I am pretty sure now that of all the members of the Broadbeck Exchange there was not one who was less absorbed than he in the serious game of money-making. He had inherited from his father a big business, a fine warehouse, two moderate-sized mills in the country, and a comfortable bank balance to which he had made no material addition. His father had thought him an indifferent man of affairs, but then the elder David had made the acquisition of "brass" the absorbing passion of his life, with religion for a Sunday and spare-time hobby. The son reversed this. He was a better man than his father but a worse merchant. For one thing he was too scrupulously honest to be in the front rank of bargainers, but also he was smart rather than shrewd, and too stubborn to be far-seeing.

Moreover he had the fatal defect, from the business man's point of view, that he was content with his position in life; and he was accustomed to regard those who were straining every nerve in the pursuit of riches with an indifference that had a good deal of proud contempt mixed with it. Broadbeck did not understand him, and long before my time had

ceased to speculate as to the cause of David Middleton's nonchalance. The opinion of his neighbours fortunately did not trouble him at all, and he was pleased rather than perturbed by their somewhat sneering pleasantries, for he was one of those men who make their own standards and their own laws, and who are inclined to impose them upon others with the high-handed arrogance of infallibility.

In after years people would tell me that it was evident that something competed with business for the first place in my master's thoughts and interests, but they were altogether wrong. There was no competition—everything had to be subordinated to his religion ; and if the two interests conflicted—or, to put it more accurately, if he decided that they conflicted—it was the business that had to yield. What few, perhaps none, realised was that the man was in bondage to his creed ; a creed in part traditional, in part self-manufactured, and stamped in every part with the marks of its fallible originator.

Nonconformity was strong in Broadbeck in those days, and David Middleton was nonconformist to the very marrow. There were many like him, who had no belief in the power of the Keys unless they could hold them, and who were most convinced of the satisfactory progress of Christianity and the near establishment of the Kingdom of God when they found a Christian community, large or small, that they could guide and dominate. When the community tired of the domination and rebelled against it, such men either betook themselves elsewhere to start afresh, or else held themselves aloof from the councils of the Church and became dissenters to Dissent. Not a few men of this type —and it is common enough in the West Riding—are narrow, prejudiced, and bitterly intolerant ; but others, in spite of their failings, are the salt of their society. I have learned by experience that most men are better than their formulated creeds ; and a man's real religion is that living

force which proceeds from depths that he has never plumbed and which often impels him in directions that his creed would not approve.

A place had been found for me in the "top-room" of David Middleton's warehouse, where I had the advantage of working under the lash of Tom Greening's tongue, a piece of good fortune which I shared with some dozen others, men and boys. I see Tom now as he was at that time—a spare man of sixty with hair just turning grey, prominent cheek-bones, a rather thick nose, firm lips, and hard, unsympathetic eyes. When those eyes were turned upon a group of talking men all talking ceased and the group dissolved; when those lips opened to upbraid they gave forth no uncertain sound, and though foul language was prohibited in D. & D. Middletons' establishment, Tom Greening could run more closely along the boundary of the prohibition than any other man I have ever met; and his words never lacked emphasis.

He had been with the firm longer than its master, and he ruled everybody except "Mr. David," as he was privileged to call him, with a rod of iron. Yet when I speak of the good fortune of serving under him I am not sarcastic. Like a certain famous schoolmaster, if he was a brute, he was a just brute, and the boy or man who worked with a will and proved himself reliable held the key to his favour. If I had expected indulgence from the circumstance that I was Mr. Middleton's protégé I should have been soon disillusioned. Fortunately I was eager to learn and interested in my work, and the suspicion with which Tom had received me soon gave way to a feeling that was at any rate less chilly.

I was quite unaware, however, of the progress I had made in his regard until I had been with the firm four months. I remember the scene and the conversation as though it had been yesterday. It was the middle of a wild March morning. The snow was driving against the windows, but the

light was bright, and the room was all the more cheerful, perhaps, because Tom's sour visage had been absent from it for a good half-hour. Then he came in and one glance at his face told everybody of the storm that was raging inside. He marched up to his desk at the far end of the room and shouted to me to follow him.

"Put up a wee prayer, laddie," whispered Scotch Jack as I passed, and I returned his smile, though not without foreboding.

Tom was in his shirt-sleeves, as usual, and he was biting his thumb, which was a particularly bad sign, when I approached, but he wiped it on his waistcoat and shoved both hands into his pockets as he said:

"You've got to finish 'ere."

My heart sank and my breath failed me. All the light went out of the room in which I had been so happy, and I could only gasp a "Why?"

"'Cos t' boss says so, an' what I say counts for nowt," he shouted, the scowl deepening on his brow. "It's allus t' same tale. If a downright bad 'un comes he's to stop while Tom licks him into shape. If a decent 'un turns up by any odd chance, off he goes to another job. 'Eads someb'dy else wins; tails, Tom loses.' But you've no need to pull a face like that an' start a-shiverin'. He's goin' to send you to t' miln."

The blood returned to my cheeks, and Tom continued savagely:

"What he can't let well alone for, God knows. It 'ud try t' patience o' Job, an' I telled him so. If I'd known at t' start what I know now I'd ha' bested him, but he bamboozled me, plague tak' him."

I was silent, not daring to speak, and the torrent of Tom's words rushed on.

"He reckons to send for me about them pieces o' Aristides wi' t' stains on, an' then asks, sort o' indifferent, what

frame you're makin', an' I tell'd him t' trewth for owt I know, without spreadin' a lot o' butter on; an' he says, 'You're none ower enthusiastic, Tom,' an' I says, 'No, I'm none ower young, an' it's same wi' lads as I read somewheer about wer wives, t' best on 'em is nobbut middlin'.' An' then he said he thowt he'd hev to try you somewheer else, an' I could ha' felled mysen."

Reading between the lines of the narrative I could see that I had favourably impressed Tom and that he had conveyed this impression to his master, and my pulse became almost normal. Tom scowled worse than before as he continued:

"I'm none goin' to say 'at I want to lose you, for you aren't one o' t' gas-actin' sort; an' if there's a bit o' dot-an'-carry-one about your feet you're level enough i' t' top story; but when t' boss has made up his mind you might as well try to shift t' ware'us. He's goin' to send you to Brier Dene an' learn you t' business, so that's all there is about it, an' he said I wa' to tell you. An' now 'at I hev tell'd you——" He made a motion with his head that dismissed me, and I had been back at my work a few moments when he recalled me.

For what seemed a full minute he remained silent, and the expression on his face was enigmatical. He was leaning against his stool, and debating with himself, I imagine, whether or no he should say what was on his mind. At length he spoke.

"What made t' boss tak' you up?"

I replied, honestly enough, that I did not know, but I told him how we had become acquainted, and he pondered this awhile before he said:

"Well, I've nowt again' you, an' he's a right to do as he likes. You've dropped o' your feet this time, an' if you walk your shoes straight ther's no tellin' where you may land. I know Mr. David, from t' wool to t' cloth, an' if you

go by me you'll keep your eyes open an' your mouth shut if you want to 'bide on t' right side of him. That an' puttin' your back into 't 'll see you through. Now we've wasted time enough over t' job."

The prospect was pleasing, but one consideration blurred and spoiled it for me—it was the thought of Victoria. We had become great chums and were studying hard together, and the idea of being separated distressed me so much that I said nothing of what Tom had told me to those at home.

I was glad that I refrained, for within a week I was called into the office and made acquainted with my employer's plans. As soon as one of the cottages at Brier Dene should become vacant we were to take possession of it, and Victoria was to be instructed in the art of weaving.

There was now no cloud on the horizon of my hopes, and I looked eagerly forward to the time when the fetid court should be left behind, as I hoped for ever.

CHAPTER VI

INTRODUCES ALDERMAN BLUNT

THERE had been few large houses within walking distance of Innershaw, and when as a boy I had let my imagination dwell upon kings' palaces it had been able to picture nothing grander than the picturesque Elizabethan hall close to where we lived, which was sometimes used by its owner in the summer time as a shooting-box. When I came to Broadbeck and saw the large houses that dotted the sides of the hilly suburban district called "The Heights," I was filled with amazement that so many rich people could be gathered together in one small area. Many of the houses were only villas, but I thought of them as mansions; and amongst those so glorified was Mr. Middleton's town residence.

"The Hollies" was, as a matter of fact, a comfortable but quite unpretentious house, that stood in its own grounds, though the grounds were nothing more than a large garden. A broad carriage drive, bordered by thick bushes of holly and myrtle, curved from the low entrance gates to the front of the house; and behind this screen of bushes there was an oval lawn.

This lawn is inseparably connected with my memories of the house and its occupants, for reasons that will appear, and it was to me the most attractive feature of the grounds. It had not formed part of the original scheme, but had taken the place of certain currant bushes which the elder David had planted there fifty years before. Mr. Middleton's

father had been a man of a practical turn of mind, caring little for the dignity of a front garden, but very wide awake to the advantages of fresh fruit and home-made jam. His son's disposition was similar, but the younger David had another power to contend with, and his niece, Mary Everard, knew how to extract indulgences and wheedle away opposition; and Mr. Middleton, under these influences, had resigned the currant bushes with only a pretence of resistance.

In addition to the lawn the garden provided at least one other attraction in a tiny conservatory on which Mary spent a good deal of thought and her uncle a good deal of money, and which paid good interest in the pleasure it gave to both. Let me hasten to add, however, that Mary Everard had not the ordering of her uncle's household. Indoors she had neither voice nor vote, for there was an Aunt Ruth in whose eyes Mary was just a chit of a girl. It was out of doors that she was, if not the head of affairs exactly, yet a neck which could make the head wag in the most docile way imaginable; and I believe Mrs. Middleton never withstood her niece in that domain, for she took very little interest in the garden.

The household consisted of these three, with two sedate maids; and I got to know them all fairly well, for in the late spring my master took a chill that was followed by a rather severe attack of rheumatism, and partly because he had taken a fancy to me and also because he discovered that I was gifted with an unusually good memory, I was invariably employed as messenger until he returned to business. In those odd moments of waiting, sometimes in the bedroom, sometimes in the dining-room or kitchen, I said and learned much.

Mrs. Middleton is not likely to figure very prominently in my story, so I may as well say now that I never took to her. It is not quite easy to explain why, but she was so good—

so patently wrapped round and round in goodness—that I always felt desperately wicked in her presence, and afraid of her charging me with it. She could be very sweet and agreeable, but sometimes there was something acid in the sweetness. She had never had any children of her own and she did not understand young people; she certainly did not understand her niece, who was a precocious child, always ready to ask questions which her aunt could not or would not answer; and she did not at all mind reproving her in my presence, and foretelling gloomy things of the next generation.

The maids respected her, but I feel sure they did not go beyond that, and she was scrupulously just in her treatment of them; but her husband was her chief interest in life. She was very proud of him, and never more so than when there was least reason for it. She rejoiced in his fits of stubbornness, which she mistook for high principle, and as time went on I came to know that she was often the cause of them. They were, I suppose, in many ways a well-matched pair, but I have often wondered what sort of man Mr. Middleton might have been if his wife's disposition had been different. There were times, I believe, when she governed him; but he was no weakling, and when their wills did happen to clash, and Mrs. Middleton saw that her husband had made up his mind, she would hasten to bow her neck with that wifely submission that not only puts a devoted husband on good terms with himself, but restores him most promptly to his normal state of subjection. I watched this little comedy on more than one occasion with secret amusement; but it was at a much later date.

As for Mary, she loved her aunt and obeyed her, but the love she bore her uncle was altogether warmer and more golden; indeed, it surrounded him in those early days with a halo that would have made him unrecognisable to anybody else.

I have been led to mention "The Hollies" because it was there that I first saw one who was to become a familiar figure as the years went by—Alderman Blunt.

Mr. Middleton was convalescent and tea was being served upon the lawn when I arrived one sunny afternoon in early June with an urgent message from Tom. The dyers had sent in some faulty shades and there were some matchings to be examined, so I was told to bring a camp-stool up to my master's chair, so that I could hear and take down his instructions. There were long intervals during which I had the opportunity of studying Mr. Blunt, who had turned to converse with Mrs. Middleton.

The Alderman was a near neighbour of the Middletons and his house was really worthy of being called a mansion. It was pretentious, like its owner, who was a pompous old gentleman, of commanding appearance, tall and well-proportioned, though lacking the expanse of waistcoat usually associated with the aldermanic office. His stiff collar and white "stock" betrayed him a member of the old school; for that kind of neck-gear—common enough in our great-grandfathers' days—had been abandoned by everybody except Baldwin Blunt, who retained it on that account. It was an act of defiance to modernism, a challenge to public opinion. I always fancied that he felt himself summarised in his neck-tie: its white folds signified his spotless reputation; its stiffness set forth his uncompromising attitude to the world; its singularity indicated that the man who wore it toed no chalk-line but his own.

His face was hard, and there was no warmth in the grey eyes that peered out from the thick white eyebrows. He was one whom men might fear and obey but not love.

Mr. Middleton never got beyond respecting him, but he treated him with more deference than he accorded to anyone else. Tradition had something to do with this, for he once told me that as far back as he could remember Mr.

Blunt had been held before his eyes as a pattern of all the Christian virtues. The photograph of a younger but still be-stocked Blunt had hung in the drawing-room at "The Hollies" as far back as my master could remember, for he had been the best customer and closest friend of the older David. In those days the drawing-room was ordinarily used only once a week, on the Sunday afternoon and evening, and Mr. Middleton admitted with a laugh that he used to regard it as a Holy of Holies in which were enshrined the principal household treasures, of which the elaborately-framed photograph of Baldwin Blunt was the most sacred and awe-inspiring. The boy had always been compelled to remove his boots before he went into the drawing-room, and that no doubt accounted for the impression that the austerely virtuous Blunt was somehow connected with the Burning Bush of Scripture.

He invariably spoke in a loud voice, articulating his words clearly but with too frequent emphasis. His speech was like the correspondence of a bygone age—much underlined or italicised—and its tone of authority vexed me. My master's questions and my answers, though both were in undertones, caused him much annoyance, and he would break off in the middle of a sentence and turn his head in our direction with a frown that left no doubt of his meaning. I caught odd sentences that fixed themselves in my memory, but I did not know that the conversation that afternoon was to affect the whole of Mr. Middleton's future and largely to influence my own.

I gathered that Mr. Blunt had been trying to persuade my master to subscribe heavily to one of his pet charities, and that the response had not been what he had expected. Mrs. Middleton appeared to be hinting that her husband's offer was, in proportion to his means, even more generous than the Alderman's own contribution. "You are such a very rich man," she said sweetly.

"Not so rich as you imagine, I daresay," he replied complacently; "though I cannot deny, of course, that the Lord has prospered me according to His promise. I have reached the age of seventy-five and proved the truth of Scripture: 'Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour.' But I have lent a good deal of money to the Lord—a good deal of money."

The tone was that of a man who was very well satisfied with himself, and who never doubted that the Lord was just as satisfied, and Mr. Middleton, who had kept at least one ear open to the conversation, although he had his eye to a piece-glass, broke in caustically:

"That's merely an investment, you know, Mr. Blunt. You might risk another thousand."

If it was a half-sneer the Alderman was too conceited to recognise it, and he honoured the suggestion at face value.

"I trust, David, I shall never speak of risk in connection with anything I do in the Lord's cause. I seek nothing again but the approval of my conscience—nothing more than that."

He turned his head towards my master and bent a stern, reproachful look upon him.

"Just so," commented Mr. Middleton; "I was only pointing out that the money isn't lost if it's invested."

Mrs. Middleton hurriedly interposed, and soon afterwards I left, bearing with me the conviction that Mr. Blunt was very familiar with the Bible and could use its texts to buttress his beliefs in the most remarkable way. It was years later, however, before I heard from both Mr. Middleton and Mary Everard an account of what followed on that memorable afternoon.

Mary, it seems, had puzzled her brain over the Alderman's implication that his wealth and long life were the reward of goodness. It was plainly to be inferred, then,

that if only people were good they would be rich and long-lived; and she asked if this were really so.

The Alderman quoted the text again, giving chapter and verse, and seasoned his reply with the suggestion that young people were not made to read their Bibles as they had to do when he was young, or they would not need to ask such questions.

Mary thought this over and then said: "But father and mother died young, and they were not wicked." Her whole soul was in arms on behalf of the parents she had never known, but whose memory had been kept fresh and sacred by her uncle.

"They were as good as gold, both of them," said Mr. Middleton.

"Then—then——" began Mary, and stopped. She wanted to say that the Bible or the Alderman must be wrong; and the old gentleman, understanding this, was horrified and indignant.

Mary was sent away on some pretext or other, but her uncle was himself troubled by this contradiction of facts, and he argued the matter rather hotly, somewhat to his own surprise and to the marked disapproval of the older man, who said severely:

"The ways of the Lord are past finding out, but we must never doubt His Holy Word. The Lord has prospered me and lengthened out my days, as He prospered your father and lengthened out his. That is proof enough for me."

"What about Josiah, then? Aye, what about our Lord Himself?" persisted Mr. Middleton. "He was young when He died, and poor too."

Mr. Blunt rose. He would not lend himself to cavilling. "I am surprised, David, that you should ask such a question. Our Lord trod a path that no other man treads, He went a way that no other can follow. The path He trod led to the Winepress, and He trod the Winepress alone."

Mary had returned and was listening. "What is the Winepress? Is there a way to it now, and can anybody tread it, Uncle David?"

The question was not answered, but it had opened out an avenue of thought which Mr. Middleton found himself compelled against his will to follow.

He and his wife had been brought up in the same narrow school as Alderman Blunt, where the Bible was regarded as a book of texts, each of which meant just what it said, and bore the sign manual of Omniscience. And now there came this contradiction between the fact of his dead sister's goodness and the inspired statement as to the reward of virtue. It made him uneasy, for it seemed to threaten the foundations of his faith.

But the other problem was even more disquieting. "What is the Winepress, and could I tread it?" It seemed to him there was a challenge in the question, and he was not the man to turn his back upon a challenge. Was he prepared to be true to principle at whatever cost? Would his faith stand the test if God should make trial of him as He did of Job and take away his material prosperity? It was not an agreeable thought, and his heart sank within him as he dwelt upon it and tried to realise what it might mean to himself and others. He brooded over the problem by night and day for a week or more and then dismissed it. He had faced every possibility and his mind was made up. What man had done man could do. What was possible in Job's case was possible in his. If the way of the Winepress were still open and the fingerpost of duty should point in that direction he would not turn away from it. He, David Middleton, was not to be outdone by Job.

CHAPTER VII

BRIER DENE

WE removed to Brier Dene in June and my life became at once richer and brighter. It was good to breathe sweet country air again and to be in close touch with Nature. If the lonely moors around Innershaw had made me pensive and introspective, the squalid slum in the town had oppressed my spirits, and I believe it would have crushed me if I had remained there much longer. Victoria saw this and was puzzled; but mother understood and went away willingly. In a week's time I was a new creation, physically and mentally refreshed. I drew in draught upon draught of life's elixir and felt myself transformed, and everything and everybody became new at the same time.

The vale of Brier Dene, where Mr. Middleton's mills were situated, is only seven miles from Broadbeck, but it is off the main roads of traffic, and it was at that time so secluded that only a few vagrant holiday-makers knew of its existence.

It is even yet the most beautiful spot in a tract of country that some writer has called "The Throstle-Nest of Old England." It is a place of cool woods, thick with bracken, fragrant with the sweet breath of Nature, where a little brook hurries along with the fuss and importance that we usually associate with little things. Clear brown waters they are, full of life and sparkle, and they leap and splash along the stones for a mile or more after leaving the woods,

until the bosom of the Aire receives them beyond Waterfoot, and the sparkle is lost for ever.

It is the home of many of my most precious memories, and there is no other place in England that can offer me the varied attractions and the peculiar charm of Brier Dene. God so fashioned the land that the roadmaker when he came was forced to be an artist, working in curves and serpentine coils that delight the eye; and Nature fights hard against the encroacher, channelling the steeper roads with watercourses, littering them with stones, and flanking them with tall grasses and spiked bushes that narrow the roadway and trespass upon it.

Where else is there a knoll, rising from the very heart of the vale, speckled so thickly with broom that it looks as if the sky had rained golden drops upon it? Moses saw one bush burning with fire; at Brier Dene I can show you at one season of the year a whole hillside ablaze; and in the warm, moist days of autumn you may see these same bushes covered with gossamer, like nets stretched out by fairy hands and spangled with diamonds of dew.

From the crest of the Knoll you can see something of the village, but not too much, for Nature, cunning artist, has an eye for effect and is fond of surprises. The bridge and the squat old inn, for instance, with the houses that cluster around them, are tucked away out of sight in the hollow below the Knoll; and the little one-roomed cot from whose chimney the smoke curls blue against the dark background of trees is not nearly so isolated as it looks. In its garden, if I may dignify with that name the inclosed space near the house, blackberries grew rank and wild in my time and were plundered by the boys of the village with fearful glee —fearful because the rightful owner was the village policeman.

The ivy-covered house to the right is the Manor, and the substantial building with the mullioned windows away

there in the fields is the Hall—a place of historic interest. In the distance, half a mile away or more, the upper village clings to the hillside and has its rows of plain and even ugly houses curtained in kindly haze. *My* village is the old one near the bridge; but beyond those ugly dwellings in the distance Nature has hidden away her masterpiece. You might visit Brier Dene a hundred times and never see it, but once discovered you would draw in your breath from sheer shock of delight. It is a moorland glen, painted in vivid colours of gold, purple, brown, and green, with huge grey rocks tossed down higgledy-piggledy in the days when giants ruled riotously. It is a scene to make you thank God for the gift of eyesight; and there are others I recall, almost equally intoxicating in their effect upon the senses, which have permanently enriched my life, and which I am tempted to describe; but I must forbear. Think, however, of Nicholson's Court, with its broken pavement, high walls, and grimy atmosphere, and you will perhaps realise what my feelings were when Providence, in the shape of David Middleton, sent me to Brier Dene.

Our new home seemed a palace to Victoria, and we were very comfortable and happy there. Cherry Cottages were a row of houses, eleven in number, conveniently situated near the footpath that led to the adjacent woods, and the highroad that went past the still more adjacent Wheat Sheaf Inn.

The houses were low and roomy. A healthy cherry-tree climbed the front of each, and their laden branches shaded the "chamber" windows. All the windows were radiantly clean, and most of them were filled with bright-hued flowers in pots, so that the Row might just as well have been named "Cheery" as "Cherry."

They were a little below the level of the field-path and separated from it by a roadway three or four yards wide, and by a high wall. You had to go the full length of the

roadway before you reached our home, which was the last house in a block that stood back from the rest. Over the low wall at the end was a field tenanted by hens that had been given to mother by Mrs. Middleton, and at the bottom of the field was the Valley Mill.

The tenants of all the cottages were employed by Mr. Middleton, and two of them—two sets of them, I should say—occupy an outstanding place in my memory.

Sam Lightfoot, together with his old father, lived in the house next to the high road, and Sam would have been loth to change it even for a better. The situation of the house, as I have explained it, was very satisfactory from Sam's point of view, and its proximity to the public-house was especially in its favour. Not that Sam was one of the Wheat Sheaf's principal supporters; on the contrary, he preferred as a connoisseur the brew obtainable at the Horse and Jockey on the bridge, a few hundred yards lower down. But Sam was afflicted with a throat that was at times so dry that urgent measures of relief were necessary, and the Wheat Sheaf was providentially placed for such recurring occasions.

There were other advantages, however. Sam was a warehouseman by trade, but a sportsman by free choice, and his hobby was not approved by the gamekeepers and the policeman, who wished that the woods were not so conveniently near to Sam's dwelling.

The others, who were our next-door neighbours, were Bella and 'Tilda. The two women were experienced weavers and they had been with the firm many years. To use their own expression, they were "naught akin," yet they were united by that close and mysterious spiritual bond to which mere blood relations are often strangers. They had first met, years before, by the loom "gate"; had looked at each other, "sized each other up," and in their own unromantic way fallen in love at first sight.

Bella was then a woman of thirty, 'Tilda her junior by perhaps ten years, and they were alone—both newcomers in search of work. There followed a vow of union, hardly spoken, but that had been faithfully kept; and from that time they had occupied together the cottage in Cherry Row. Each was jealous of favours shown to the other, and Joshua Bingham, the manager at the Valley Mill (known to everybody, young and old, as "Joss"), had to steer his course very carefully between the Scylla and Charybdis of their opposing interests and suspicions; yet each was hot in defence of the other's rights. They quarrelled between themselves and sulked for days, and were by turns tearful and defiant in the privacy of their own home; but they showed a united front to the world, and were, I imagine, happy; though each would have denied it stoutly.

I never knew anyone of whom it could be said more appropriately that "their bark is worse than their bite"; but the bark was so continuous and full-mouthed at times as to be more than an inconvenience.

They were good neighbours, and mother found herself at ease with them from the first; but Victoria and I made no friends, and sought none. We scoured the country together and were very happy, though Victoria was not nearly so much affected as I by her new surroundings, and she never became a Nature-lover in any real sense. I recall with amusement one scene out of many that indicates our contrasted attitudes.

It was Sunday afternoon, and we had left the road and followed a tiny path which wound between the bushes until we reached a sheltered spot high up the Knoll, where there was a good view of the romantic valley, and here we sat down with our book.

The beauty of the scene seized me and the book lay unopened. Victoria turned upon me a half-amused look.

"You are a funny boy, Louis, you really are. We came

out on purpose to read, and the minute we sit down you start star-gazing as usual."

"In broad daylight?" I said, smiling into her eyes. "There's no desperate hurry for the book. It's all so lovely that I just can't take my eyes off it."

"But I can't think what you see," she urged. "We've been here before and we've seen it all many a time now. They're the same trees, an' the same mill chimney popping up among them, and the same hills and sky. Let's get on with the book."

"Oh, Vic," I exclaimed, perhaps a little reproachfully, "why can't you see things as I see them? They're not the same trees, and the same hills and sky, and it isn't even the same mill chimney. See! there's a bit of light running down and across it. It's off now, and there's another following it and racing it over the tree-tops!"

"Well, Louis Turner," she said without any emotion, even of laughter, "you are a silly. They were only shadows."

"You don't see, Vic. I can see with my eyes closed more than you can with yours open. I can see not only the woods, but the fairy people who live there. I can——"

"Oh, rubbish!" interrupted Vic. "Are we going to read, or aren't we? We shall never get anywhere at this rate."

Mother sympathised with Vic, and the two did their best to stifle my sentimentalism by means of protest and ridicule. Vic poured out her complaint that afternoon as mother poured out tea.

"What caps me," said mother, "is 'at he can see things 'at isn't there, but he can't see things 'at is. I don't believe he knows which drawer we keep t' knives in. I might be tied to a chair an' gagged, an' I should be choked afore Louis 'ud find a knife."

"I should use my pocket-knife," I interposed.

"Well, 'appen you would if you chanced to think on 'at ye had one, but I'll be bound you'd be at t' door looking for t' moon i' t' water-butt or some such nonsense, an' never giving a thought to your poor mother."

"Well, never mind," said Victoria, who, having set the ball rolling, was now anxious to divert its course; "you know you've got me to look after you."

Mother and Victoria had become firm friends. In every direction save one there was perfect understanding between them; only the girl's adventure in pursuit of learning had remained an unintelligible freak. Mother's expression changed as she replied:

"Aye, lass, an' I thank the Lord for it. Not 'at I need any looking after, for I'm strong an' 'earty yet—touching wood as I says it. But it's nice to have a lass about the place; an' as the Lord didn't give me one o' my own it seems a stroke o' luck 'at you should ha' turned up i' this way; an' it saves a deal o' bother; for if childer's a blessing, them 'at brings 'em into t' world has a lot to go through, whether they're lads or lasses."

"What did you touch wood for?" asked Victoria. Such offerings to the gods had been unknown in Nicholson's Court.

I explained the superstition, but Victoria was incredulous.

"How does it keep illness off?" she asked.

"Don't ask me," mother answered. "I wasn't allus prying into things when I was young. All I know is 'at my father allus touched wood i' that way an' he died in his seventies; same as he allus kept a raw potaty in 'is trousers' pocket to keep off rheumatics, an' it wasn't oft 'at it troubled him, an' never i' that leg. Now Louis' father laughed at such things, an' look where he is."

Victoria laughed too, but encouraged mother to follow in her father's footsteps. "And if Louis doesn't, perhaps he'll never live to be a great man," she concluded. It was

the girl's firm belief that though I had not been born great I was destined to achieve greatness.

"An' that's a true word," said mother. "He'd be better like to make something out, would Louis, if he wasn't for ever day-dreaming, an' scoffing at everything 'at he can't understand. I reckon naught o' such ways."

Her tone chafed me and I said, "I wish I knew how to please you. What would you like me to do?"

"Nay, lad," mother replied, "I've said my say. I'd like you to get on same as Vic says; but then if you did, i'stead o' marrying her, as you're allus talking about, you'd as like as not pick up wi' some fine lass 'at 'ud look down on your old mother an' break 'er 'eart for 'er; so I don't know but what you'd happen better go your own way."

"I should marry Vic, however great I became," I protested hotly; "and I should never be ashamed of you, never."

"I think you are both sillies," said Victoria. "It's silly to talk about getting married when we're only kids; and besides, I've never said I should marry Louis. And it's silly to say Louis would be ashamed of you, because he isn't that sort, *I* know. I think we'd better get washed up."

CHAPTER VIII

THE VALLEY MILL

MR. MIDDLETON'S mills were separated by nearly a mile of woodland. They had been built in close proximity to the stream after the custom of their time, in order that the water force might be utilised to turn the wheels that supplied the motive power for the looms and spinning frames. Long before the present date, however, steam had demonstrated its superiority and rendered the manufacturer independent of the cheaper but more uncertain water-power, with the result that factories were being built on every hand in more convenient if less romantic spots.

The conservative instinct was still strong, however. Here and there a mill-master was found with sufficient strength of will to abandon the tools of his fathers in favour of those which the new era of steam offered him. Here and there men took their courage in their hands and boldly removed their factories from the country to the town, or at any rate from the remote valley to the neighbourhood of the village where the operatives dwelt, and where communication with the large towns was easy. But they were exceptions. Little by little, as the superiority of the new methods became too obvious for the most bigoted mill-owner to ignore, innovations were made; the mill-wheel gave place to the engine, and the hideous chimney arose from the hillside or above the tree-tops in the valley, and belched forth its black smoke in mockery of the stream

whose office it had usurped; but until inconvenience was stretched to the breaking-point, and removal or ruin became the alternative, the old mills on the banks of the brooks were not abandoned.

Right up to the time of his death Mr. Middleton's father had been content with water power. The Upper Mill had been built in the heart of the wood, a mile away from the village by the field path, and even more by the crooked and stony lane over which the drays had to travel. The Valley Mill, however, was only a stone's-throw from the bridge and the dwellings of the "hands," though until the round chimney was erected you might never have suspected its presence, as it was almost concealed by a rising mound on the one side and a thick screen of trees on the other.

But when the younger man came into possession he had not hesitated to make friends with the new power, and had promptly put an engine into the Valley Mill and run his looms by steam. He had been urged to this course not so much by competition—because at that time competition did not affect him very much—as by the practical difficulty of maintaining a constant water supply. In the case of the Upper Mill his experiences had been less irritating; and partly on that account, in part also because he had felt that he was making some concession to the spirit of his father; and again—though in much less degree—because it had seemed to him a "beastly shame" to put a chimney in such a romantic spot and to do away with the mill-race which had seized his imagination when a boy, he still utilised water-power for his drawing-frames and spinning-jennies. But he would have gone out of business altogether rather than forsake the Upper Mill, with its early and cherished associations.

At first Victoria and I were stationed in the Valley Mill near the bridge and a field-length from our home. It was Mr. Middleton's intention that I should learn the business

thoroughly, and Joss had received special instructions to "put me through the mill" in a double sense. In due course, and at Joss's discretion, I was to leave the weft-room and go to the Upper Mill to study the mysteries of "drawing" and spinning.

My master had no boy of his own to follow him in the business, and he had been strangely drawn to me. I do not think he had definitely decided what position I was to occupy—it was not his way to run ahead of his impulses to see where they were leading him—but he certainly meant well by me, and my prospects depended more largely than I realised upon (I don't like the phrase, but it is expressive) how I played my cards.

As for Victoria—well, she was a girl whom Mr. Middleton liked because she had a bit of the tigress in her, and because he had befriended her, which was the secret of his liking for a good many people; but it did not much matter what she did so long as she earned her wages. Having been handed over to Joss she was passed on by him to Bella and 'Tilda to be instructed in the art of weaving. If she had been given into the charge of Bella 'Tilda would have sulked; if 'Tilda had been the chosen one Bella would have bottled up her tears and uncorked them at the mid-day meal. By dividing her, so to speak, between the two, Joss not only secured his own peace of mind but Victoria's immediate and prospective comfort.

They were at heart kind, and indulgent towards mistakes not due to inattention and carelessness; and they were thoroughly competent teachers. Victoria, on her side, was willing to be taught and determined to learn quickly. When teacher and pupil are in unison progress is rapid. Within a week the women were proud of their probationer and ready to receive her on equal terms.

Their dialect was of the broadest; so broad indeed that any attempt to reproduce it in its entirety would make it

unintelligible to most, and therefore I must tone it down; but it harmonised exactly with their character. From them we soon learned much of David Middleton and the estimation in which his workpeople held him.

Victoria reproduced for us one of the earliest of the conversations with Bella as they stood beside the loom.

"Keep yer eye on that door, Vic, when yer talkin', an' t' minnit ye see it oppen shut yer mouth up an' turn to yer piece. If it's nobbut an ovverlooker or Joss ye've no 'casion to bother, but if it chances to be t' boss 'e'll make yer 'air curl for ye."

"But why, Bella?" inquired Victoria; "I'm not neglecting my work. It isn't as if I was idling."

"Well, don't do it, that's what I'm tellin' ye. 'Ave ye ever seen 'im in a mad 'ig? You 'aven't? Well, ye needn't want. 'E doesn't say much, but 'e goes white down to 'is gills, an' lightnin' comes out of 'is eyes, an' 'e cocks 'is 'ead a bit o' one side an' tightens up 'is lips while 'e comes close up to ye. 'E doesn't say much then, but what 'e does say is to t' point, an' don't you forget it—ye never will forget it."

"Has he ever stormed at you?"

"'Asn't 'e? You ask 'Tilda. But ye needn't worry Mondays an' Thursdays, 'cos them's market days i' Broadbeck an' 'e never comes. But other days 'e's as uncertain as t' weather; ye never can tell. 'E's a terror, is David."

"Does everybody call him David?"

"Behind 'is back they do, but not to 'is face. No fear! I'd like to see them as dare. Seth 'Alstead an' his missis does; but then they're old an' they knew 'im when 'e was a lad. But let 'im catch *you* callin' 'im David."

"I never should," said Vic indignantly; "but all the same I'm not afraid of him like a lot of you are. He's always been good to me. You are all silly about him."

"Oh, are we?" answered Bella. "You wait, that's all.

He's all right as long as things goes 'is way, but you just tread on 'is corns an' watch for fireworks. 'E's very religious, is David. 'E'd pray a hen off its nest when 'e's in a meetin'; but 'e's got a bit of the devil in 'im, I can tell ye."

"I don't care, he's a downright good man," said Victoria stoutly.

"'Oity-toity! who said 'e wasn't? I reckon nowt of a man who's as soft as bran mash. A man who 'asn't a bit o' the devil in 'im 'asn't much else awther. Nobbut 'e wants to keep 'im fastened up an' only let 'im go t' length of 'is chain. Sometimes 'e slips t' ring wi' David."

"Do all his hands dislike him, then?"

"Dislike him! Dislike David! Whativver's put that notion into yer 'ead?"

"Well, if you are all so frightened of him that you shake in your shoes when he comes round for fear he lets the devil loose on you, how can you help disliking him?"

"Look 'ere, lass, there's lots o' fowk i' this world 'at ye don't dislike 'cos they never do nowt to vex ye. They do nob'dy any 'arm an' they do nob'dy any good; never 'ave done, never will. But ye don't like 'em at t' bottom any more nor you like bread baht salt. Now I doubt if there's anybody i' t' two milns 'at dislikes David Middleton, savin' Sam Lightfoot; an' Sam 'ates 'im."

"How is it Sam hates him?"

"'Cos 'e's a bad lot, Sam is, an' 'what fellaship 'ath righteousness with unrighteousness?' That's Bible trewth, lass. Sam 'ates David Middleton 'cos Sam's a rank bad 'un, an' 'e knows David's a good 'un, an' 'e can't bide 'im."

"I heard Sam only yesterday say that Mr. Middleton was a . . . you know, canting humbug."

"Listen to me, lass. There's some warps as is that bad ye can't weyve 'em. Ye struggle wi' 'em an' better struggle,

an' ye lose brass an' ye lose yer temper, but ye can mak' nowt out of 'em, an' they've got to be lifted out at t' finish. But some weyvers struggles longer nor others afore they gives in. An' lots o' bosses 'ud ha' chucked Sam Lightfoot out long sin', an' Joss 'ud ha' done it if 'e'd ha' had 'is way. But David thinks 'e can weyve 'im wi' patience an' mak' a passable piece out on him ; but 'e never will. He'll mucky 'is ticket one o' these days, will Sam, you tak' a bit o' notice."

"Then Mr. Middleton can be patient ? " queried Victoria.

"He brades of a lot more," replied Bella curtly. "He preyches patience for other fowk. It's Joss 'at 'as to be patient, an' David doesn't know 'alf nor quarter o' Sam's goin's-on, an' nowt o' what 'e says about 'im. 'Owever, if 'e did it 'ud mak' no difference if nobbut 'e'd made up 'is mind to bear wi' 'im."

"Well, I like Mr. Middleton, anyway," said Victoria. "Look what he's done for us ! We were nobody to him, but he's let us have the cottage and given us some furniture for it, besides all the hens. And he's found work for Louis too. I shall always stick up for him, even if he lets the devil loose on me."

"Look out, lass ! 'E's 'ere ! " Mr. Middleton was upon them before Bella could get back to her own loom, but he nodded at them both in a friendly way and asked :

"Well, Bella, how's the 'prentice going on ? Can she start and stop her loom without sending the shuttle flying at your head ? "

"She's none that bad for a beginner," replied Bella. "I've no fault to find wi' 'er."

"That's all right. Can she take her 'ends' up properly ? "

"She's gettin' into that nicely. She's better nor some 'at's been at it longer."

"And isn't always grumbling at her warp, eh ? She'll

be a perfect weaver then, Bella, won't she ? " Mr. Middleton was pleased to be facetious.

" She's 'ardly been long enough, 'appen, to ha' got as far as that ; but there is bad warps at times, you know, Mr. Middleton."

" I know there are, but there are more bad weavers, Bella. It's easy to blame your warp when it's your carelessness and want of patience that ought to be blamed. That's the way all through life, you know. Don't you forget, Vic, that there are lots of people who blame their circumstances or their Maker when they make a mess of their lives—anything or anybody but themselves." And he nodded again and turned away.

" That's David to nowt," said Bella. " 'E must allus preycha bit, but all t' same, as you was sayin', you've plenty to thank 'im for, an' so 'as lots more. Why, look at Seth 'Alstead ! Seth had Joss's place, you know, i' t' old man's time. I never knew t' old man—I mean old Mr. David—but 'e lived in t' Mill 'Ouse, yonder, part of 'is time, an' I saw 'im once or twice afore 'e died. 'E was a stern-lookin' old gentleman, wi' a long white beard ; but 'e died just after we came, an' 'e'd been retired some years then. Our Mr. David lives there now i' t' summer-time.

" But as I was sayin' about Seth. When 'e got too old for work—an' 'e wasn't that old either—young David, as they called him then, pensioned 'im off i' grand style. He bought 'em yon cottage by t' roadside an' made 'em a present on it, and he put some money into summat—I known't what it is, but it's summat safe, 'at brings 'im in every week thirty shillin' as reg'lar as t' clock, an' nob'dy can take it from 'im. When 'e does a thing 'e does it reyt, I can tell ye."

" I suppose he couldn't do it," said Victoria, " if he wasn't very rich."

" I don't know," snapped Bella. " I daresay he's rich

enough. He gives 'undreds an' 'undreds away if t' fit takes 'im, so I suppose 'e must 'ave plenty left. But I daresay there's scores o' business men i' Broadbeck 'at could buy 'im up, but they can't thoile to spend their brass on onybody but the'rsen. It isn't what a man has; it's what a man is."

"But Lizzie Nelson was telling some of us that he wouldn't give them a penny at their chapel, though they were doing all they could to clear off the debt; and they'd relied on him because he's done so much for them before."

"Oh, aye, but they've started singin' a anthem of a Sunday night, an' that finished 'em off reyt. They tell me 'at 'e got white mad an' let t' old lad slip 'is collar an' no mistak'. 'E'd meant to give 'em fifty pound, but 'e's sent it to t' missionaries instead. 'E says they'll be 'avin' t' Mass next, an' when 'e's owt to spare for popery it'll go to t' Catholics."

"Lizzie's a Wesleyan, isn't she? Does Mr. Middleton go to that chapel?"

"'E's a Reformer, is David, or summat o' t' sort, but when 'e's 'ere 'e swops about between t' Wesleyans an' t' Uniteds, accordin' to 'ow 'e falls out wi' 'em. 'E's a good friend to 'em both when 'e's that side out, an' when 'e isn't—— Look out, lass, yer pickin'-strap's broke, an' t' shuttle's out! Where's Joss?"

CHAPTER IX

WE MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF STEPHEN TRUMAN

IT was a summer of unusual brilliance, bright and hot, with just sufficient rain to keep the watercourses busy and the earth green. During the hours of heat the woods provided a retreat of welcome coolness, for there the heavy dews lingered upon the grass and the yellowing fronds, and the sun's rays were caught in the thicket and only allowed to filter through here and there where the courtly birches were complaisant or the woodman's axe had made a breach that Nature had not had time to repair.

We had not found our work hard, though the hours were long. Every morning the clatter of clogs on the pavement caused me to leap hurriedly out of bed, for it told me there was no time to lose if I was to be at my post when the engine should be started on the stroke of six; and it was six at night before the labours of the day were over.

Long hours, however, were of small account when the work was congenial, and Victoria never found them too long. She was matter-of-fact by nature and had been inured to hardship and scanty fare all her life, so that for her life had become not only worth living but something of a picnic. My experiences had been less bitter, and the long hours of confinement were at first trying, but it never entered my head to complain, for I was only too thankful to have dropped on my feet so unexpectedly.

Vic and I were alike in this, that we were determined to "get on," and I think Tom Greening would have been satisfied that we were "putting our backs" into the work;

but in the realm of inward sensation we were governed by different kings. To Victoria the "Ridge" with its gnarled and wind-swept oaks and fern-covered slope was, like the woods and the meadows, "very nice"; to me it was one of God's masterpieces placed in the spacious picture-gallery of earth for my enjoyment; and the woods with their thousand indescribable glories were another Eden where God still walked in the cool of the day and spoke to those who did not hide themselves from Him. It was Bella's idea that we should both have benefited from being "shakken up together."

Matter-of-fact and unimaginative as she was, however, Victoria had never wavered in her determination to acquire knowledge. She had said she would and that was the end on 't. That she would tire or fail never occurred to her mind as an even possible contingency. From the first hour she had been faithful to her vow and had treated her aspirates and "g's" with such respect as to call forth the open laughter of her small circle of acquaintances. But Victoria's armour was impervious to the shaft of ridicule, and she only bit her lip and spoke more slowly and correctly than ever and made rapid headway in consequence.

The transition was made easier by the removal to Brier Dene, though in one respect it had proved unfortunate, for it had removed us from the free library with its store of hidden treasure, and from the night-classes to which we had looked forward as a hopeful possibility rather than a certainty.

But this had not proved an unmixed evil. What few books we possessed had been read until we knew them almost by heart, and the subject matter had become an integral part of our mental stock. Best of all, the dearth of books had provoked us not only to store but to weigh and appraise the thoughts that were offered us; and that in itself was an education, though we did not know it.

With Victoria, then, reason held the sceptre; and in her opinion I had far too many ideas that were not subject to the sway of reason and which could only be described as "silly."

"Louis Turner, I've read the same sentence over three times now, and you didn't know it. You aren't listening."

It was Saturday afternoon, and we were sitting on the banks of the stream quite close to the Upper Mill, which was only just round the bend among the trees. Victoria was reading from a little book of Ancient History which she had borrowed from a Sunday-school library, and I, with my knees clasped in my hands, was gazing in front of me.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Vic," I said. "I had been listening, really. I heard all about Servius building a wall and making a trench, so that all the hills were united and formed one city. And how his mother was a slave, and yet people honoured the man because he cared for them."

"I'd got pages past there," said Victoria with mild exaggeration; "and I should have gone on and on if I hadn't glanced up and seen the look in your eyes; so I read one sentence over three times straight on, and you never noticed it."

"Vic, it's too bad of me. I really didn't know I wasn't listening. I was just looking at that fine old beech. I could count eight trunks all rising from one root, and they made me think of eight sturdy sons of one majestic father, like some of these old Romans. But please read it again and I will listen."

"Well, do; or I'll read to myself.

"'Servius Tullius had two daughters, of whom one was good and gentle, and the other haughty, imperious, and heartless. In like manner Aruns and Lucius, the two sons of the elder Tarquinius, were of different character; the

one was good-tempered, the other was vicious and violent. These sons of Tarquin, Servius Tullius married to his own daughters, and thinking to soften the hearts of the wicked by the gentleness of the good, he gave to the wicked Lucius the sweet Tullia to wife, and the proud Tullia he married to the good-natured Aruns.' "

"Not badly read," said a voice behind us; "though the Latin quantities leave something to be desired. Now who the deuce are you?"

Victoria looked up, and I rose to my feet in some confusion. We saw a tall, thin man, clean-shaven, with a somewhat large but straight, well-chiselled nose, and a long neck on which the skin hung loose below the chin. His lips were thin and firm and tightly closed. The cheek-bones were high and prominent and the ears lay close to the head and were partly hidden by a mass of straight and rapidly whitening hair, which was brushed carelessly back from the forehead. He had beautiful eyes, mellow and full of refinement, and they sparkled whimsically as he looked down upon us.

He was hatless, but the sun had not left its mark upon his complexion, which was uniformly sallow—a sallowness that was accentuated by the remarkable depth of white collar, apparently several sizes too large for him, that encircled his neck, and by the black velveteen coat that hung loosely from his shoulders. He stood with one hand in his trousers-pocket, and the other playing gently with his watch-chain, in an attitude of ease and humorous interest.

I was too confused to reply at once, and the stranger continued:

"So you are tongueless, are you, when the actual drops upon the legendary? And yet, by all the gods of Rome, you were full-voiced enough, girl, a moment ago; and you read with understanding . . . deuce take it, you read with understanding, I tell you; though my old tutor would

have squirmed like a worm to have heard the names of his heroes so murderously mouthed. Am I right, girl? 'Understandest thou what thou readest?'"

"We don't understand it all," replied Victoria; "but we do our best, don't we, Louis? And we can't help making mistakes in the names, because we aren't used to them." Victoria was inclined to be sulky; she did not like to be laughed at. Our new friend was much amused.

"You are not used to them? Of course you are not used to them. Why, hang it, girl, how should you be used to them? You need a guide . . . I tell you you need a guide. 'How should I except some man should guide me?' The point is, do you want a guide? . . . that is the point, do you want one?"

He had withdrawn his hand from his pocket and was now full of animation. He walked up and down as he spoke, gesticulating with hands and shoulders and bending down over us when he became specially emphatic.

"We should like one very much, sir," I ventured to say; "but we have no one to teach us. Vic and I are doing our best to learn; but we should do much better, of course, if we had someone to help us."

"But what are you out for, boy? . . . I say what are you out for?" He had the most curious habit of repeating himself, and he spoke, if I may put it so, in gusts—one moment calm, the next almost violently excited. "What is the object of your reading—fun? Deuce take it, there is any number of story-books which tell how nice girls married naughty men . . . I tell you, boy, there are thousands of them . . . rubbish; rotten, worthless rubbish. Why go to old Servius Tullius and the days of ancient Rome? But I asked you who you are. Hang it all, boy, if the girl will not speak, surely you can answer a simple question and satisfy my curiosity. I say, who the dickens are you and where do you come from?"

He stopped in his perambulation and knit his brows like an examiner confronting an unwilling student.

"We work for Mr. Middleton, sir, at the Valley Mill; and we live in Cherry Cottages. My name is Louis Turner and hers is Victoria Smith."

The newcomer laughed outright.

"'Hers is Victoria Smith' . . . the dickens it is! No wonder you consort with kings, Victoria Smith. Louis and Victoria! A royal combination, truly. And you work for Mr. Middleton through the week, and on Saturdays read how the naughty Tarquin murdered his brother's wife. The dickens you do!" He paused for a moment, and again frowned down upon us. "Now tell me, what are you out for? I say why do you do it?"

This was at least intelligible, and Victoria replied:

"We are digging for hidden treasure."

There was no mistaking the man's surprise and gratification. He had the most eccentric ways. He jumped back as if the expression had startled him; then stepped forward a couple of paces and peered into Victoria's face.

"Say it again, girl; hang it all, I ask you what you mean." He was certainly excited and the lines of his face were working strangely, with a curious twitching of the brows.

"We read about it in a book called *Sesame and Lilies*, sir," I explained. "It says that treasure is hidden in books; and Vic means that we are trying to dig it out."

"The deuce you are; and you really mean it? Hang it all, are you tongue-tied? I ask you, girl"—and he seized Victoria by the shoulder and half shook her as he spoke—"do you mean it, or are you playing at it? Tell me."

"Of course I mean it," she said stolidly. "If that treasure's to be found I'm going to find it."

"Good! And you, boy?"

I replied that I was going to find it too; but I was not as

confident as Vic, and the stranger detected the hesitation in my tone, and his keen eyes searched mine in a way that filled me with confusion.

"Em!" grunted the man at last, as if satisfied. "You are an open book to me, Louis Turton, or whatever your name is, and I don't think I can make much of you; but we'll see. . . . Hang it, man, we'll see what can be done. But as for you, Victoria Smith, I tell you I'll make a scholar of you. By Jupiter and all the gods, I'll make a scholar of you. Digging for treasure, are you? You shall find it! I tell you, you shall find it! Come with me, both of you."

We glanced at each other but did not speak. I saw that Victoria was indulging a hope, and I felt a pang of jealousy which I trust may be excused. Hitherto I had been her only teacher and she had looked up to me with the respect one accords to a superior. After all, it is something to be Triton even among the minnows, and my first feeling was one of resentment towards this man with the domineering manners who threatened to usurp my throne. I quickly recovered myself, for I was too sensible to give way to petulance, and I could not help seeing the advantages that lay in our new friend's implied offer. Besides, he would be no competitor for Victoria's affection. He was in another rank of life—a gentleman; a man of culture, undoubtedly, in spite of his eccentricities and needless expletives; and he was well, if carelessly, dressed.

He was no boy, either, but a man of at least forty, and therefore to me quite elderly; and he was evidently competent to guide us in our search. At any rate he gave that impression, for he seemed to know all about Servius and Tarquinius, and spoke of their gods with indifferent familiarity.

He went down the bank, crossed the plank bridge and strode ahead, flinging an occasional remark over his shoulder, but otherwise leaving us to ourselves.

"Isn't he a queer 'un?" whispered Victoria; "he has a neck like a plucked hen; and goodness me, doesn't he fidget!"

"Yes," I replied in the same low voice; "he goes backwards and forwards whilst he's talking to you like a——"

Comparison failed me and Victoria helped me out.

"Like a shuttle," she said; and then we were both silent, for the subject of our remarks was waiting for us.

"Look here, Louis Tempest," he said as we came up; "you heard what I said—I don't know that I can make anything of you, I'm hanged if I do. You've eyes that reflect your soul and I can read you like a book. What are you standing still for? Come on."

When we had crossed the fields and emerged upon the road near the beck he hurried up the hill until he came to a house that stood back from the road. With his hand upon the gate he halted.

"This is my home," he said; "the home of Stephen Truman; henceforth the home of your friend. You hear me, Victoria Smith and Louis What's-your-name? . . . deuce take me if I can remember it. . . . I say your friend. Come in!"

He produced a key from his pocket and, unlocking the door, led the way into a sitting-room.

We both looked around in amazement. From floor to ceiling the walls were lined with books. There were even books over the mantelpiece; there was not a square foot of wall that was not covered with books. The table and the desk by the window were littered with papers, and there were magazines and books in the deep and comfortable easy-chair near the hearth. The only ornaments on the mantelpiece were a clock, a tobacco-tin, and half a dozen pipes.

Victoria gasped and forgot herself.

"Is it a lib'ry?" she faltered.

"No; it's a library, Victoria Smith; you hear me, A LIBRARY. It is a room appropriated to the use of books, and therefore a library; but I do not call it by any such high-sounding name. It is my den. Just my den, you understand. Sit down, both of you."

He waved us to chairs, and we sat down—on the very edge.

"Now list . . . What the dickens are you sitting like that for? Are you afraid the chairs won't bear you? That's better. What was I saying when you interrupted me? Oh—there is gold in this land, and the gold in the land is good. But you'll have to dig to get it out. Hang it all, Victoria Smith, I tell you, it's got to be worked for." He flung himself into his chair, but was up again in a moment and began to pace the room like a caged beast. "But I'll show you how . . . Deuce take it, I'll show you how. And you SHALL get it. I can't get it for you, but I'll make you get it. Do you hear me, Victoria Smith? I say I'll MAKE you get it.

"As for you, Louis Triffitt"—he paused, and again bent his brows over me, standing quite close—"I'll lend you what you like, and I'll guide you where I can, but I won't bother much with you . . . hang it, it wouldn't be any use. You'll go your own way, I know you will, for your soul is like large print to me; but hang me if I'll waste much time on you. Now you know your way. Come on Tuesday night as early as you can. . . . No, hang it, come on Monday. Now, off you go. What are you waiting for? I say I've plenty to do."

CHAPTER X

HOPES AND FEARS

BRIER DENE was not a place in which it was ordinarily difficult to find out what one wanted to know about one's neighbours; indeed, the people were generally better informed of a man's private concerns than he was himself, and they took almost as much interest in them. The way to obtain the freedom of the village most quickly was to detail your family history and the reasons that had brought you to the locality, with at any rate the appearance of willing candour. I remember yet how Victoria surprised me by the display of a ready inventiveness when she was asked for particulars of her immediate ancestry.

This being so I never doubted that I should only have to ask in order to have all the information curiosity desired as to who and what Stephen Truman was; but in whatever direction I turned I ran up against a wall of blank ignorance. Even the postman's information was evidently guesswork; and if Old Clatterclogs, as we irreverently called him behind his back, did not know, further inquiry was sheer waste of time.

One thing was clear—he was on the *index expurgatorius* of the village; a man of mystery, and therefore a man under suspicion; who attended neither church nor chapel; sought no friends and encouraged no advances in the direction of friendship; and was apparently satisfied with the services of a woman like Elinda Heaton, who added to

various minor enormities the crowning offence of "cleaning down" only once a year.

Except for Elinda and her husband, who, being simple in his mind, did not count, Truman had for three or four years lived alone in a house that was considered much too large for him. He had appeared one day without warning; whence, why, nobody knew or could get to know. From that time onward he had regularly received huge parcels of books and magazines and just as regularly despatched rolls of manuscript and important looking envelopes, which for the most part bore London addresses. The village had long before made up its mind that a man who hid away and had no friends must have acquaintances somewhere who would be glad to lay their hands on him; but as he paid his bills promptly and was generous at Christmas he had come to be tolerated though not approved. Seth and Susan Halstead were of another opinion, but this was later knowledge.

When it became known that Victoria and I were to become Mr. Truman's pupils we were regarded with mixed feelings in which I fancy commiseration predominated. If the Pied Piper had been heard of in our circle the story might have furnished a warning of the kind of conclusion we might expect to our adventure. We came away, however, not only unharmed but with whetted appetites.

Our reception on the Monday was not encouraging, for our new tutor had apparently forgotten all about us and was writing away busily when we were introduced; but after a few impatient remarks, muttered to himself, he burst into a laugh and ejaculated:

"Victoria, by all the gods I had forgotten your existence, but I remember you well enough now. You are going to dig for treasure, and by Jupiter, you shall—I say by Jupiter you shall."

He bade Victoria remove her hat and directed us to draw our chairs up to the table, which he cleared by the simple

expedient of sweeping half its contents—magazines and loose papers—on to the floor. Then he swung himself round in his revolving chair and frowned upon us.

I admit that I was a little alarmed at the man's sudden and almost savage moods, and his frown was deep enough to be called a scowl. I learned before long that these were only the outworks of the man that concealed a rich and generous, though eccentric nature. When he warned us against gossiping about him and his work, the thought of which had called forth the frown, he sprang to his feet and shook his finger excitedly before us. "Deuce take it, if you do I cut you off without warning. You understand that—WITHOUT WARNING. Now is that plain, Victoria the doughty and Louis the seer?"

It all ended in a smile which relieved us and loosened our tongues sufficiently to yield the promise; but that was his way all through. His speech was always expanding into capital letters, and when he foresaw a danger he so visualised it that it became at once a reality for which we had to be sternly reprimanded. We got used to it before long.

Then again his face would soften and his voice become gentle as when he said:

"God help you both if you haven't grit in you. You are fascinated by the prospect of this treasure, but it has to be worked for. I repeat, it has to be worked for. Are you prepared to pay the price of wisdom?"

Victoria was the bolder, and she answered, "Yes."

Then, still speaking quietly, he bade us count the cost, reminding us of the long hours in the mill, of the little time there was for recreation, of the elusiveness of success, and he continued:

"You will not find the same sort of treasure, Victoria and Louis. You, girl, will dig in the quarries of human learning to which I will direct you, but Louis will go where his spirit leads him. You will blast the rock and unearth hidden

stores; but Louis will get his from the breeze and the stars and God alone knows whence. He may climb Parnassus—I don't know, but he may; and you, Victoria Smith, for aught I know, may go down to hell."

The climax was startling and I glanced at Victoria uncertainly, but she had her eyes fixed on Mr. Truman and was apparently prepared to go anywhere under his guidance.

The hour that followed I shall never forget. Our teacher began by finding out all we knew, and when he had satisfied himself he jumped up and became the man we had first known.

"Louis Turner—hang it, boy, I believe I have got your name at last—I am not going to waste my time and yours dragging you through etymology and syntax and the maze of Euclid and the like—I tell you I won't do it. Boy, I read your soul. You shall come with Victoria; deuce take it, I won't have the girl alone; and you may pick up the crumbs that fall from the table if you like, but I won't bother with you. Look you, boy, I like you—the gods only know why, but I do. Here are books—hundreds of 'em—and you may read them, submitting your choice to me, and I will guide you to the beginning of the path—I say I will put your feet in the right way, and more than that I will not do.

"As for you, Victoria Smith, I will make a scholar of you. That I can do and I will, and no more than that. Now off you go."

We trod on air that night and for many a day; and as we went to him two and sometimes three nights a week we soon lost all fear of our new friend and even began to feel towards him something of affectionate regard.

He, on his part, did not conceal his satisfaction at the steady progress of his pupils. Victoria went ahead by bounds and showed a power of concentration and quickness

of perception which make me marvel now as I think of it. And she paid the price willingly, sitting up far into the night with her books, so that mother's predictions of evil became veritable jeremiads, though they were never realised. My tastes lay in other directions, and in actual knowledge I was soon outdistanced; but we remained great friends, and the hold which Victoria had upon my affections tightened from day to day.

Who told Mr. Middleton of our relations with Mr. Truman I do not know; and at that time neither Victoria nor I would have dreamed that our private concerns had any interest for our employer. We should probably have thought that what we did out of business hours was no business of his. But that was not at all his view; and Mr. Middleton, though he would have fought, I have no doubt, for the freedom of the slaves in the West, had a good deal of the spirit of the slave-master in his nature. We were more than his workpeople: he had redeemed us from poverty and we owed him not only gratitude but devotion. I know now that in my case at any rate he was constantly on the look-out for that tribute of admiration and reverence which is to some men the most heavenly reward earth ever offers. "Ye shall be as gods," said the serpent to Eve, and that bait seems always to have had remarkable attraction for the good.

In coin of this kind I had paid him well. He was to me a far greater man than the lord of the manor, who lived in the stately mansion on the hill and owned the land for miles round. I think I credited him with minor omnipotence in those early days, and felt sure that if he was not as rich as Sir George Carfield it was only because he had not cared to amass riches. In treasure of another kind I took him to be a multi-millionaire. I was young, and a hero-worshipper, and I had had little experience of live heroes.

However, as I say, it had not occurred to me that he

might take an interest, and particularly a supervisory interest, in my private concerns. I had not realised that it would have pleased him well, for instance, if I had attended chapel instead of church, and had sought his advice as to which of the three chapels was most desirable. I shall always be glad that I did nothing of the kind, but I did not know my master well enough to be confronted with the temptation.

When, therefore, he came across me in the mill one day and summoned me with a jerk of the head and a curt word to follow him to the office, I wondered what my offence had been, and spent a miserable half-minute in reviewing my conduct. There was no mistaking the storm that was threatening.

This was evidently what Bella called one of his "mad 'igs"; and Joss, who was at his desk, gave one look at us both and then went out.

"What's this about your going to Mr. Truman for lessons?"

I was almost too astonished to reply, but I managed to stammer forth an explanation which I saw was not satisfactory.

We were both standing. Mr. Middleton's chin was in the air; his face was grey; in his half-closed eyes there was a look that was almost cruel. He was biting his lip and tapping the floor impatiently with one foot.

"Do you know the man's an atheist?"

I knew nothing of the kind, nor as a matter of fact did he—all he knew was that Mr. Truman was hardly ever seen at a place of worship. I did not believe it either, though I could not at the moment have marshalled evidence against it. I felt, however, that Mr. Middleton was unjust, and my loyalty to my new friend was not shaken. I remained silent, for at that time when people lost their temper with me I invariably lost my tongue. I have let slip many an advantage by overcoming that defect.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he said, and the tone of his voice made me realise that a good deal might hinge on the answer. I looked up at him timidly, and my heart sank at what I saw. I knew in that moment that my idol had feet of clay; that he was capable of sending us all back to poverty if we crossed his will; and the thought of what that meant to us made a shiver run through me. And all the time his eyes were never removed from me: they pierced me even when my own were on the ground.

"Well?" he repeated irritably, as I did not speak.

Then I suddenly became calm. I told him how we had met Mr. Truman in the wood; how he had questioned us and heard of our Great Resolution. I told him of Victoria's determination, of her eagerness to learn, and of our new friend's enthusiasm to teach. Where the words came from I did not know, but I spoke simply and I daresay I spoke well, and I gathered confidence as I proceeded. I think I succeeded in conveying the impression that my religious beliefs were not likely to be disturbed, and I am very sure that I neither apologised for our behaviour nor promised to amend it. Whatever I said had an extraordinary effect, for Mr. Middleton's chin came down, and his eyes opened, and I felt that I was reprieved if not acquitted.

He got on to a stool and began to play with a ruler. "A soft answer turns away wrath, Louis," he said. His voice was still hard, but not unkind. "So you and Vic are going to be scholars, are you? Well, I don't want to put a spoke in your wheel, but I'm going to be straight with you. You can't touch pitch and keep clean hands, and if you read your Bible you'll find it says, 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful'—and that man's both. You've to pay with your soul for the devil's schooling."

I did not speak, and he tapped his knee thoughtfully with the ruler for a moment or two and then said:

"I won't say what I was going to say five minutes since, but I'll have a word with Mr. Truman when I see him. Will you promise to tell me what he says if he ever mentions religion to you?"

I promised readily, for I did not then realise what religion was or how subtly it could be taught; but neither did Mr. Middleton, and I was dismissed with a warning:

"Well, be careful, that's all I can say. I've no opinion of that man, and if you were my lad I should make short work of it."

When I told Victoria she was very indignant; but we continued to visit Mr. Truman, and as the weeks went by we gradually forgot Mr. Middleton's displeasure.

CHAPTER XI

TITANIA'S DELL

THERE are many fine stretches of highroad in Yorkshire, but few finer than that which connects Brier Dene with the country town of Bexleigh, not quite two miles away. It is a high road in a double sense, but the pedestrian gets no pleasing panoramas during one-half of his journey, for it is cut through the heart of a thick wood. He will not complain, however, for Nature has made ample provision for his entertainment. Great trees overarch the road, and there is rank and multicoloured vegetation to be seen beyond the walls, which are so low that they might almost as well not be there at all. Thousands of people know the road now, for Brier Dene has begun to attract excursionists, and many of them have much to say about the beauty of the scenery; but I wonder if any of the number could tell you where Titania's Dell is to be found. John Marshall knew and so did his master, for Mary Everard had pointed it out to them, but I believe she never told anyone else except me, and I recall the occasion with amused interest.

It is the picture of my own boyish shyness that amuses me so much. I remember how uncomfortable Mr. Middleton made me by bidding me hurry off as hard as I could go and meet Miss Mary at Bexleigh station one warm day in early September. Marshall was to have gone, but Mr. Middleton had forgotten all about it and Marshall was elsewhere. I glanced at my dirty hands, and my master understood what I meant, but was unconcerned. "They're all

right!" he said impatiently, "the train's due in twenty minutes. Off you go!"

That was a command, and I went; but it was unthinkable that I should appear before Mary Everard with unwashed hands, and by running most of the way I saved sufficient time to call at a cottage near the bridge at Bexleigh, where a woman I had never seen before yielded to my request to be allowed to scrub myself clean at the sink. Mary was alighting from the train when I reached the station. I was hot and breathless, but not disreputable.

Mary was returning from a holiday and she had a trunk and a number of parcels. She was willing to leave the box at the station, but the parcels had to be carried by hook or by crook, and I was not at all disconcerted by their size and bulk. Mary was queen in a world of her own, and I was her very humble servant, and felt it to be a high privilege to carry a queen's parcels.

Of course I stood in awe of her, and of course she knew it and was gratified. She was not proud or conceited and she had none of that objectionable quality which we now call "side," but she was as human as the rest of us (though I did not think so then), and we all like homage, even if it take the subtle form of admiration for our indifference to homage. Mary was a frank, high-spirited, rather romantic schoolgirl who enjoyed good health and found life pleasant, and who thought it the most natural thing in the world, I daresay, that the boys should be her henchmen. To me, who really knew very little about her, she was half-fairy, half-goddess, and when I sought to visualise the Hebes and Aphrodites I read about at Mr. Truman's I always thought of Mary Everard.

Laden like a camel, I followed her down the main street, and waited outside a shop until she had bought a box of chocolates which I was not asked to carry; and I do not think we exchanged half a dozen words until we had crossed

the river and were on that wonderland of a highroad. Indeed, we had proceeded some way up the hill before Mary spoke. It is a steep hill and I have said that the day was warm. I was already tired and my limp and the parcels combined to hamper me. Mary walked smartly and kept a pace or two in front until, happening to turn her head, she saw that in spite of my efforts I was not keeping up with her. Then she stopped.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, and I knew that she was thinking of my lameness; "I was forgetting about the parcels. Let me take one of them."

I protested emphatically, and she did not press the point, but insisted that I should unburden myself and rest awhile. All nature was still and the silence grew almost embarrassing.

We had reached that part of the road where the wood opens out into a miniature glen. It is the most romantic spot of all. Here the trees are few in number, but they are giants, straight and strong and stately; there are huge rocks scattered about; and on one side a grey cliff garnished with tufts of fern and waving grasses walls in the glen.

"It's very pretty, isn't it?" said Mary. The tone was casual—it implied an effort at making conversation—but I saw the light in her eyes.

"It's glorious," I replied. "Puck and the fairies might dance on that green."

Mary opened her eyes wide and I flushed hotly. Then she smiled and said, "I call this 'Titania's Dell.' You know about her?"

How proud I was to reply that I did; and Mary's tone became warmer and more childish.

"She lives there," she said; "it is her palace. The walls are hung with tapestries of fern; the pillars are the tall trees; her carpet is those dead leaves, so soft and comfortable. They are putting a new one down, you notice."

The reference was to the change that autumn had already begun to make. Early as it was, some of the leaves shone like burnished copper, and the ferns were yellowing. I was quick enough to catch her meaning, and her tongue was loosened.

"Shall I tell you the story of the road?" she asked, looking down into my eyes, for I was leaning against the wall and her position on the road gave her an advantage.

I was eager for her to do so, but suggested that it might be as we walked along.

I do not suppose I enjoyed the narrative more than she did, for an appreciative listener flatters and gratifies the narrator, and she spread all her colours on the canvas for my entrancement. It was a wonderful tale of how when man had disfigured the wood by making a road the Spirits of Air, Earth, and Water had combined their powers to beautify it.

"The walls were the worst," she explained; "but the rain and the frost undertook to paint them. You see how lovely they are now, don't you? Well, that is because the fairies went to the rainbow, which hung moist in the spray of the waterfall, and dipped their brushes in it. Then they washed the walls over in delicate colours of green, and the frost stippled it, and old Father Time, who works very slowly, but who is an awfully clever artist, filled the crannies with moss and draped the grasses over the sides, and they became what you see."

This was the sort of thing I revelled in; it was what neither Victoria nor Mr. Truman could give me: something that I found here and there in books, and which existed in myself and struggled for expression. I walked like one who dreamed, and only awoke to realities when the outskirts of the village were reached.

"I could tell you lots like that, and about the moors and the brook in the other wood; but I don't suppose I shall see

you again, because we are going back to Broadbeck next week."

There was a touch of childish condescension about the remark, but what did I care for that? It is an act of grace for queens to condescend, and a privilege to be the favoured subject on whom they smile. I was a very sentimental boy, and she was a sweet, good-natured girl. I thanked the gods who had sent me on this errand.

We turned down the road that leads to the beck. "I must call to see the Halsteads, just for a minute," she said; and when we reached the cottage I remained at the gate whilst she ran in. "You dear old Susan," I heard her say; and then, "The dear lamb," in the old woman's gentle voice.

She was out again in a minute or two and relieved me of one of the smaller parcels. Susan had followed her to the door, and Mary thrust the parcel into her hands. "That's to keep you warm in winter," she said, as she put her arms round the old woman's neck and kissed her on both cheeks.

"You shouldn't have spent your money on me, lovey," protested Susan; "you shouldn't, for sure."

Mary stopped the protest with her lips. "I wish I could have given you ever so much more, you old dear," she said. "Now see you wear it, and don't put it away in that long drawer with camphor."

We climbed the stile, and crossing the fields reached the lane that led down to the Mill House. As we neared Keeper's Cottages Mary stood still and drew in her breath with an exclamation of delight.

They are very small houses, six in number, and they stand a little above the level of the roadway overlooking the Valley wood. They have not much garden, but what little they have blazed and glittered that day with colour. A wall of dahlias almost concealed the windows, but it was the sweet-peas and the wild mass of canary creeper, over

which trailed festoons of richly coloured nasturtiums, that almost dazzled the eye and made the lane gorgeous.

"Isn't it just too lovely for anything?" said Mary, turning to me.

Keeper Rufus lived in the farthermost cottage and he was standing at the gate as we approached. He touched his cap to Mary, who bade him "Good-afternoon," and inquired if Hannah were in.

The man smiled. "There's another little 'un," he said. "Would you like to see 'em, miss?"

Wouldn't she? Mary took one of the larger parcels and disappeared in company of the keeper, who returned in a few seconds, and we chatted together at the gate. Soon little Kitty came out to show her daddy what a fine box of chocolates had been given her. As she was speaking Sam Lightfoot passed and gave us a sullen nod.

"Cheer up, Sam," said Rufus heartily. "There's nob'dy after you."

"You go hang yourself," replied Sam with an oath.

"Well, I've got as much brass as 'll buy a rope, right enough," returned the keeper. "By-by, Sam."

Rufus was manifestly enjoying himself, and when Sam was out of sight he told me why.

The keeper and I were on good terms; again partly, I daresay, because I had endowed him with the qualities of a hero. This well-set-up young man in the velveteen corduroys, with not a spare ounce of flesh about him, but with a quick, keen eye that had not a trace of fear in it—this man who scoured the woods and the moors on this side the bridge, with the downward-pointed gun under his arm and the sorry-looking dog at his heels, was to me the modern counterpart of the heroes and adventurers of past ages: a thrilling and romantic figure, the story of whose deeds was passed about among the boys like the ballads of old.

"He didn't like that, didn't Sam," said the keeper,

chuckling. "You didn't hear tell o' the few words 'at passed between him and me last night at t' Horse and Jockey? Well, if you keep it to yourself, I'll tell you.

"I'd been over at Keeley o' Sunday and it was past midnight when I was fair on t' top o' t' moor o' my way home. There was a thickish fog on and it was pitch black, but I could find my way blindfold. All at once a chap got hold o' my arm and says, 'Here, I want summat, young man.' 'Aye,' I says to myself, 'and you're going to get it,' and I swings round and lands him one on his ear-hole 'at sends him sprawling.

"Then someb'dy else got me by t' coat collar, but I grabbed his scarf and lifted him off t' road wi' my foot. Then I jumped over t' wall and made off home across t' moor, 'cos I didn't fairly know how many there was of 'em.

"Well, I kept my mouth shut. I didn't think they'd spotted me and I wasn't sure about them; but I knew it 'ud come out i' time.

"I was stood wi' Tim behind t' bar last night when Sam came in t' parlour and called for ale, and before he'd been ten minutes he got agate bragging about a lark him and another of his kidney had had o' Sunday night. He couldn't see me and t' landlord, and when I tumbled to what he was saying I winked at Tim and whispered to him to hearken.

"He was telling t' tale like a hero, only you'd hardly ha' known it for t' same. 'I don't know who he was,' he says, 'but he knocked Ike down, and then I nearly wrung his neck for him, and I'd ha' finished him if he hadn't ha' given me half a quid to let him off.'

"When I heard that I nudges Tim and we went into t' parlour. 'That chap was me, Sam,' I says. 'I had my suspicions 'at it was you 'at grabbed me by t' collar, but I couldn't be sure. It's a bad habit, is bragging, lad. I think you and me'll go up and see Sir George.'

"You should ha' seen his jaw drop. 'You're a liar,' he says; 'he was a stiffer-built fellow than thee.'

"I put my hand i' my pocket and brought out three or four bits o' red wool. 'These seem to match t' fringe o' thy scarf, Sam,' I says; and he saw he was done.

"Well, he blustered away for a bit and got himself tied up in a knot, and I says at t' finish: 'Now look here, Sam,' I says, 'I'm willing to believe 'at it was naught but a bit o' marlocking, but you carried it too far. It needn't go no further,' I says, 'but I must have that half-quid back.'

"You'd ha' died wi' laughing to see Sam's face. He went red and white i' turns and I thought he was going to roar. 'You know —— well you never gave me half a quid,' he says.

"'That won't do, Sam,' I says; 'these here gents has heard you say it wi' their own ears. I've no 'casion to say a word,' I says.

"Well, he spluttered and swore, but I stood there smiling at him, and after a bit he puts his hand in his pocket and brings out eight and fourpence. It was all he had and we squared it at that, and I paid for drinks round; but Sam wasn't for supping his pint. He started using such language 'at Tim threatened to put him out."

"I guess he was put out already," I remarked; and Rufus gave me a slow wink. Then Mary appeared and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER XII

THE HALSTEADS

IT is time that I said something about Seth and Susan Halstead, two of the best and truest gentlepeople I have ever met. I know I cannot do them justice; I fear I cannot explain the influence they had upon me; but I count it one of the chief advantages of my life and certainly one of its purest joys to have had their friendship and the example of their Christian comportment. They were very humble folk, but they kept their lamps trimmed and their light shone always brightly. They were God's gentry and His representatives.

The cottage which Mr. Middleton had bought for them when the old man had been brought to feel that he was perhaps standing in Joss's way was one of the smallest in the village, but also one of the most convenient and desirable for the old folk.

It consisted of two rooms only—a fair-sized living-room to the right of the door; a sufficiently large bedroom to the left. It stood in the lane that led from the beck to the village, halfway between the two, and close to the Wesleyan Chapel, which was a sacred spot to these old people. There was a little garden, just a few yards deep, in front, and behind, a stretch of green fields with the woods beyond them. There was a window on each side of the living-room, which was thus a much lighter and pleasanter apartment than it appeared to be from the outside. Across the lane was the entrance to Mr. Truman's garden.

Seth was seventy-one years old when I first knew him, and his wife was about the same age—perhaps a little older. He was rather short in stature, grey and bent, and he had a scanty beard. He walked with somewhat shuffling steps, as one might who had had a stroke, though it was in his case a natural gait, and he was really quite active and even nimble. He had a quick wit, and a broad outlook on life which enabled him to exercise it, and there was almost always a merry twinkle in his little eyes—indeed, his face was illuminated with kindness.

Susan was about the same height but broader and heavier. Her hair was quite white and parted in the middle, and her face lacked all lines of humour, though tenderness and boundless sympathy were graven deep upon it. To look into her eyes was to realise that they were placed not far from the fountain of tears. She suffered severely at times from rheumatism, so it is easy to understand why the cottage suited her so well.

Victoria and I had soon got to know them, for they were the sort who take an interest in all young people; but Victoria was "bored to death," as she put it, after an hour or so of their company; whereas I enjoyed it and spent many an evening at the cottage. I was there to tea on the Saturday following my walk with Mary.

The little room looked particularly comfortable that night. The green plants in the window, the scarlet rug upon the hearth, the oil-cloth with its red and yellow pattern worn away in places, but smiling up from beneath the table and from the corners by the fireplace, the clean wall-paper with the fantastic shadows upon it, thrown by the lamp upon the table and the dancing yellow flames in the grate—I see it all now. No doubt the design upon the wall-paper might have offended a fastidious taste; but if the colours were crude the effect was cheerful, and it pleased the old couple who had chosen it.

On the side opposite the fireplace a modern sideboard with one large mirror and two small ones stood aloof, with almost conscious superiority, from the rest of the furniture, which was merely painted. Upon its canopied shelves two china ornaments were conspicuous. They represented Adam and Eve, and the artist had given them—without subtle intention, we may hope—very monkey-like faces Eve was separated by the width of the large mirror from her husband, who was thus fortunately unable to take the apple that she invitingly held out to him. I would give a good price to-day for those bits of china if I knew where they were to be found. On the polished board below, the central place was occupied by an arrangement of waxen fruit under a glass cover, and this was flanked by two coloured "lustres," whose prism-like fingers of white glass were usually in a state of gentle tremor. Susan was very proud of her sideboard, and spent a lot of elbow-grease on it.

She was almost equally proud of her clock. It was long and narrow and of ornate design, and it hung over the mantelpiece. Its bright brass pendulum had a slow and dignified movement that was almost impressive. I thought this room the brightest and cosiest I had ever known, and I am not sure that I have changed my opinion.

Seth washed up when tea was over, and I helped to clear the things away, for Susan's hands were swollen and painful. Two bricks were placed in the oven for bed-warming purposes later, and Seth set a huge piece of coal in the heart of the flame. "Now, lass," he said with a smile, "I think that'll see us through till it's time to twine t' lamp out."

The old woman smiled up at him, and when Seth had washed his hands we settled down around the hearth, I on a low stool between the two. We usually "talked politics," for Seth was a great admirer of Mr. Gladstone, whose coloured portrait was the most conspicuous of the three or four pictures that hung on the wall. The talking was really

confined to Seth, as I had no knowledge of the subject and contributed only monosyllables, but he was too enthusiastic to notice this.

He had just picked up the weekly paper after charging a long churchwarden pipe, when there was a short rap at the door and Mary entered. She hesitated as she saw me, but only for a moment, then as I rose awkwardly from the stool she flung her arms round Susan's neck and kissed her.

She had a red tam-o'-shanter, or something of the kind, on her head, and a red woolly-looking coat completely covered her dress. Her cheeks were aglow but her hands were cold, and she held them to the blaze after drawing off her gloves, then settled down on my stool and put her head on Susan's knee. "That isn't comfy," she said the next moment, "my cap's in the way," and taking it off a wealth of golden hair fell into Susan's lap.

It was a pretty sight, but all this time I was standing, uncomfortably uncertain what to do; too shy to obtrude myself upon the others even by offering to leave. Seth was also standing, and my awkwardness was not observed.

"You're your own mother over again," said Susan, "isn't she, Seth? You've the same fair hair with a bit o' red in it, dearie, 'at I've stroked many an' many a time before you was ever thought of; an' I could think your eyes was hers too, only they've a bit more sparkle in them."

"That's mischief, isn't it, Miss Mary?" said Seth, bending over her with arms akimbo. "Young 'uns nowadays is up to no end o' mischief, an' it always shows i' their eyes; an' specially i' them 'at's like ripe nuts."

"Why, you're full of mischief yourself, Seth, isn't he, Susan?" said Mary, stretching back her head until she could look into the old woman's eyes. "Who showed me how to make an apple-pie bed, and who taught me that trick that I played on Uncle David with the sooty plate?"

What Seth would have replied I do not know, for I had

quietly secured my cap and now pulled the tail of his coat to warn him that I was about to leave. Neither of the old people would hear of it, however, and Mary jumped up.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry. You mustn't go, really, and I believe I took your seat. I've only come in for a few minutes. Uncle's in the village and he's going to call for me."

I wanted to refuse the stool, but she forced it on me and curled up on the hearthrug at Susan's feet. I sat down as far from her as I could without being conspicuous and tried to decide whether it would please me most if she should depart at once or remain all the evening. Meantime Mary directed the conversation.

"Is the pain *very* bad?" she asked, as she kissed one of the old woman's hands that was stroking her face. "Poor old Susan."

"It's naught but what I can bear, dearie," the old woman replied; "but I shame to see Seth doing all t' work. What I should do without him I don't know; but the Lord is good to us and lengthens out our days."

I saw a curious expression cross Mary's eyes, but Seth, who had returned to his chair and his pipe, broke in:

"Oh, aye, I'm a rare hand at 'ouse-keeping, Miss Mary. I up's in a morning an' gets her a cup o' tea afore she frames to rise. Then I fettles t' grate up a bit an' does a bit o' sweeping an' dusting, an' by eight o' clock I has t' breakfast on t' table. Then she comes limping in, does Susan, one step, one groan, like, wi' being a bit stiff to start wi'; an' after t' breakfast she does a bit an' I does a bit, an' we keep t' looms running i' fine style."

"What a good husband you are," said Mary; "I'm sure I hope if ever I get married——"

The moisture was filling Susan's eyes and Seth hastily interposed:

"Why, you know, Miss Mary, love, it's just like a bit of a pastime for me, is this. It keeps my old bones from getting

set. Lots o' men at my time o' life crum'le all to bits 'cos they don't know how to pass their time. Die off, they do, for sure. So you see, lass, it's bad for thee to bide, is these rheumatics, but it's a sort of a Providence for me."

Mary must have become conscious of tears, for she got up and seated herself on the arm of Susan's rocking-chair. Drawing the tiniest of handkerchiefs from her pocket she put an arm round the old woman's neck and began to dry her eyes.

"You foolish old dear to cry," she said, "because Seth looks after you."

The sun came out again. "You an' Louis 'll think us a pair o' old soft-'eads, dearie, but you know Seth puts it all on to try to cheer me up a bit. I'm none so easy taken in; but all t' same we've a deal to be thankful for, more partic'lar me; an' every night before we go to bed I says, 'Get down on your knees, Seth,' for I can't kneel easy myself, 'an' let us thank the Lord for all His mercies.'"

"Not for your rheumatism?" inquired Mary mischievously.

"No, dearie, though p'raps if I knew all I should do. But I thank 'Im for giving me strength to bear it; an' a good husband 'at takes it patient. An' I thank 'Im twice a day an' sometimes ofter for giving us such a master as your Uncle David who's done so much for us; an' I should be very ungrateful if I didn't thank Him, 'cos you see, dearie, I've only had three years o' t' rheumatics, but I've had nigh on seventy o' good health; an' it wouldn't be fair to reap the bad up again' the Lord an' forget the good. An' through it all we 'aven't had to fret about money, what wi' t' bit we've saved an' what your uncle's done for us. Our bread has been given us, and our waters have been sure."

"Aye," said her husband, "an' it runs to a bit o' summat wi' t' bread, lass, if it's nobbut a rasher o' bacon; an' a sprinkling o' tea in t' water."

The old man was mirthful, but Mary hardly seemed to hear him. Her brow was puckered and she said abruptly:

"Oh, dear me, I do think religion is awfully hard to understand; and there is something I want to know ever so badly. Has the Lord 'lengthened out your days,' as you call it, because you have always been good? If you had been wicked would you have died young?"

"They say it's the good that die young," said Seth, laughing, but Susan interrupted him.

"There's lots o' good people die young, dearie, an' lots o' bad ones live as long as us, an' longer. It hasn't been because we've been better than others 'at the Lord's spared our lives."

Mary removed her arm from Susan's neck and folded her hands on her knee. A frown spread over her brow as she said:

"I do think it's vexing, and nobody ever explains. You know who Mr. Blunt is, don't you? He's ever so rich, and Aunt Ruth says he's a saint, but *I* think he's the most horrid old man there is. He talks like this." And Mary gave an imitation of the alderman that was as funny as it was lifelike. "Well, he said in our garden one day that good people live to be quite old and become rich, and he quoted texts out of the Bible. He's always quoting texts and asking you where they are; and he shakes his head at you when you don't know—and I never do know, *never*—and, oh, he's a nasty, horrid old thing. But he won't answer questions and I don't believe he can."

The old people looked at each other, and nothing was said for a moment or two. Then Mary, who had been gazing intently at the fire, continued:

"He said something about a winepress, and Christ treading it, and I think it must have got on Uncle David's nerves, for he and Aunt Ruth are always talking about this winepress. I don't suppose you know what it is?"

"Don't trouble about it, dearie," said Susan. "There's lots o' things in the Bible you can't understand, an' clever folks quarrels about 'em. But there's lots more 'at we can all make out; an' I wouldn't bother about these things if I was you."

"Well, but, you see, I'm built that way," said Mary. "A thing either is or it isn't, and I want to know."

She did not get to know that evening, for Mr. Middleton came in whilst Seth was puzzling over the Bible to which he had turned in search of the passage that was such a stumbling-block. He put it down when Mr. Middleton entered, and by tacit consent the subject was not referred to.

"What's this silly nonsense about a ghost?" inquired my master, in the sharp, incisive tone that he adopted when he was annoyed.

Seth glanced meaningly at Mary, who had looked up with eager interest, and her uncle interpreted the sign.

"Oh, she's not afraid of ghosts; she's more sense, I hope, and anyway we're going back to 'The Hollies' on Monday and we haven't time for such tomfoolery in town. I'll bet a good horse-whip with a bit of muscle behind it would soon end that ghost—and nothing would please me better than to provide the muscle."

"It's on t' Bexleigh road again, I reckon?" inquired Seth, whose face was graver than usual. "They tell me the women hardly dare go to t' market, an' some o' t' men isn't much better. What's t' police doing?"

"Seeking it where they know they won't find it," returned Mr. Middleton with much contempt. "I've a jolly good mind to go and seek it myself, and if I find it I bet it'll be a sore ghost when it goes to bed. You smile, Louis. What say you if we go ghost-hunting?"

I started at being addressed so suddenly and my heart beat with anticipation. Was this really an invitation to accompany my master on such an adventure? If so it was

a privilege I could never have hoped for. I was not afraid of ghosts, and I had a very boyish but also quite unbounded confidence in Mr. Middleton. Eagerness got the better of reserve.

"Oh, may I go with you?" I gasped.

I do not believe he had meant it seriously, but when he saw the look in my eyes he leaped, as was his wont, to a resolve.

"By George! I've a good mind to take it on." He pulled out his watch and hesitated a moment. "I'll take you home, Mary," he said, "and be back in half an hour. It'll be soon enough then."

"Can't I come, too?" asked Mary, whose eyes were glittering. "I'd love it."

Her uncle laughed. "Don't talk nonsense," he said, "but put your hat on."

"You'll be careful, David?" said Susan, "for the dear lamb's sake. You won't be headstrong?"

Mr. Middleton laughed again. "I don't know what I shall be," he said, as he turned to leave. "But I'll bet somebody 'll be as sore as a blain before the night's out."

CHAPTER XIII

THE GHOST-HUNT

BRIER DENE was one of those places where ghosts flourish because they are encouraged. The law of supply and demand obtains in this pseudo-spiritual realm as in any other; and there are people who are mightily afraid of ghosts and yet so proud of the possession of them and so fearfully desirous of seeing one—under safe conditions and in courageous company—that the ghost-monger is almost justified in his calling.

There are, of course, ghosts and ghosts. There are those that go into the business for a hobby, as it were, and find a sufficient reward in the shrieks of their victims and the general terror their known presence excites in the neighbourhood—mischievous ghosts; there are others that take up the work for grosser ends and do not hesitate to waylay and rob belated pedestrians—dangerous ghosts. The highway between Bexleigh and Brier Dene lent itself admirably to either kind of enterprise, and many hair-raising episodes were related in those days which were calculated to alarm the timid; indeed, there was scarcely a man or woman in the village who had not a story of some kind to tell pertaining to ghostly adventures.

For a year or two, however, there had been no scare worth talking about, but this season the ghost had come early, and was more than usually alarming. It appeared to be of the mischievous variety, for no actual misdeeds had been debited to its account; but on the testimony of quite

a score of villagers a ghastly-looking face would suddenly show itself in the blackness of the wood, its chin resting apparently on a branch of one of the big elms some distance below the roadway. Some said it had no body; others were sure that they had seen a filmy robe swaying lightly to and fro. Bob Berry, our only policeman, was of this number, and he claimed that he had not only seen it but had tried to chase it and that it had "floated" to a higher branch and remained there motionless, but with a horrible stare. Nobody believed the latter part of the narration, for Bob, who was getting stout and short-winded, was notoriously a cautious and peace-loving officer; but his evidence was freely quoted as conclusive proof that the ghost existed, and for some days past the road to Bexleigh had been almost deserted after dark.

As I look back I wonder that Mr. Middleton should have invited me to accompany him on an adventure that might have been supposed to have an element of risk in it. I was only sixteen and neither big for my age nor strong, but no consideration of this kind would occur to him, for he was, as I have indicated, a man of hot impulse, and too self-reliant to foresee danger. Moreover he knew, I think, that like many others of nervous temperament I was not without courage, and he was absolutely right if he had concluded that I was not afraid. This is not boasting. On the wild moor where I had spent my boyhood, tales of ghosts had been common enough, but they had been ridiculed by my father and schoolmaster, and I had been trained as a child to go up and face the mysterious and not run away from it. The Bexleigh ghost had no more terrors for me than had the "barguests" and ghostly hounds of Innershaw.

I ran down home to get an overcoat and to inform mother that I was going out for a while with Mr. Middleton. I was more communicative to Victoria, who walked with me as far as the beck.

"I wonder if he'd let me go," she said; "but then, of course he wouldn't, so it's no use bothering. You're a lucky beggar, Louis."

I left her standing on the bridge and looking thoughtfully into its waters, and was back at the Halsteads' a full half-hour before Mr. Middleton arrived. When I saw him I scarcely recognised him, for he had turned up the collar of his short overcoat and was wearing a soiled, misshapen cap, and looked rather disreputable. He had a thick, short-handled whip in his inside pocket, and also a dark lantern which he strapped round my body and underneath my overcoat. Susan was full of warnings and entreaties, but Seth was in high spirits and sped us on our way with many a chuckle.

Soon after the clock had struck the half-hour after nine we left the cottage and took the low road to the highway, thus avoiding the village. It was densely dark, for not only was there no moon, but a thin veil of mist hung over and about us like a curtain, though always at some distance.

There were not many people about, and what there were had formed into groups for safety, and we passed them without replying to their greetings by more than a word. We walked leisurely, so that my limp was not conspicuous, and it was after ten o'clock before we left the open country behind and entered the wood.

With the trees interlacing their branches above our heads we seemed to be passing into a long tunnel of unrelieved blackness, but as my eyes accommodated themselves to the conditions I could make out the boles of the trees on either hand, standing even more densely black against their inky background.

It was the first time I had ever felt darkness wrap me round and tighten upon me. The muscles of my legs stiffened, and I trod as one treads who is blindfolded or who

walks downhill on ice; but I can honestly say that I was fascinated and not in the very least afraid; and I felt that Mr. Middleton was virtually renewing his youth and in the best of spirits.

I had never seen him like this before. When the last group had passed, arm-in-arm and singing loudly to keep their courage up, Mr. Middleton climbed the low wall and bade me follow him, and we sat down on a rock and were completely screened from observation. After a while I felt that he was shaking with suppressed laughter, and I began to laugh myself, though I did not in the least know what he was laughing at. I did not venture to inquire, but I soon found out.

"It would be an easy job for you and me to play the ghost, Louis. All we've got to do is to turn the light of your lamp on to that tree when somebody comes past. I'd give a shilling to see Bob Berry run!"

Thus are forgotten fires rekindled in the old and virtuous!

If it were a temptation Mr. Middleton got the better of it, and I asked him if he thought the ghost would appear that night.

"It's sure to do," he said. "It's not likely to let Saturday go by."

The words had scarcely left his lips when we heard far down the road the sound of shrill feminine voices raised in terror, with deeper tones which told that men were there too. The party came rapidly nearer, and we could hear that they were running, and it was easy to tell that the danger-zone had been left behind, as hysterical laughter began to take the place of shrieking. I removed my cap and peered over the wall as they passed, and made out the forms of six people, equally divided as to sex. They were still hurrying and short of breath, but the tongues of some of them were loose.

"I'll bet it's twenty feet high if it's a yard," said one. "Did you see how its eyes blazed?"

A woman's voice, composed and half-reproachful, broke in:

"I think three men might have gone to see what it was. Somebody's playing a wicked trick on us; that's what it is."

There was a chorus of protest, amid which a grumbling voice was heard: "How could we go when there was women wi' us?"

"That was Lizzie Nelson?" suggested Mr. Middleton.

"And Sam Lightfoot," I replied.

"Then it isn't Sam this time," he said, in what I thought was a relieved tone.

When their footsteps had died away Mr. Middleton put his hand in his pocket and drew out the whip.

"I think we shall get the beggar, Louis," he said. "As well as I could make out by the sound he's just above the lane that goes down to Waterfoot. You're not afraid, are you? Well, get back on to the road and creep quietly down until you come to the lane. I will keep on this side and make my way in the same direction. If you see anything, whistle softly three times and I shall hear you."

"What if they try to run past me?" I whispered.

"Turn on your lamp and wave your arms," he replied; "and they'll think you're a policeman. I shan't be many yards away."

I climbed the wall and made my way cautiously down the deep gutter on the side of the road. I soon reached the little lane and had gone down it a few yards when I heard the sound of footsteps approaching from the direction of Bexleigh. "Now," I thought to myself, "the ghost will surely appear again."

Four young men passed along the highroad as I hid behind a tree. They were not quite sober, and they talked thickly and loudly as they walked; but their legs cannot

have been affected, for the next moment they were scampering along the road at top-speed, uttering frightened cries.

I confess that for a moment or two my own heart beat madly. At the first sound I had peeped from behind the tree and the cause of their alarm was apparent.

Some twenty yards away, in the depth of the wood, a strange form showed grey against the thick trunk of an elm. It had no arms, but just a flowing gown surmounted by the outline of a head. It was only a skeleton face that could be seen—two twinkling eyes, two spots where the nostrils should be, a mouth which showed huge teeth of pale flame, and the mere shape of a face—all ghastly green. The chin seemed to be resting on the bough of the tree, as the report had said, and the gown hung limp below. I held my breath for a moment and then I laughed—it was all so obviously faked.

I gave my three whistles, and to my amazement the ghost seemed to turn its head in my direction and then sink to the ground. I listened intently and heard Mr. Middleton's long low whistle in reply, and it sounded comfortably near.

At the same moment I felt sure I saw a man run out of the wood and cross the field on the other side of the lane, and I hastily climbed down the bank with the object of cutting off his escape if he should emerge in my direction.

I forgot all about my lamp when I saw him leap over the gate a few yards above where I stood, and in my excitement I shouted aloud and waved my arms. He was tearing down the road, but when he saw me he stopped.

I was determined to delay him until Mr. Middleton should arrive, but although I shouted my loudest there was no answering shout, and in another moment the fellow had made up his mind, and bending his head rushed down upon me and endeavoured to butt me out of his path. He was himself not much more than a lad, but powerfully built, and I should undoubtedly have got the worst of the

encounter if it had not been for the lamp which had been strapped beneath my overcoat. As it was his head came in contact with this, and he fell stunned to the ground and I alongside of him.

When I came to my senses Victoria was trying to unbutton my collar. I was too confused for her presence to appear anything but natural, and my first question was as to my assailant, who had disappeared.

"Oh, he's gone home to get his head bound up," she said in the most matter-of-fact way. "You're all right now, aren't you?"

"Well," I said, getting on to my feet, "I'm a bit dazed; very short of breath and rather sore behind the lamp, but there's nothing much the matter beyond that."

"I tried to shout, but I couldn't get a word out," said Victoria, "and I wasn't near enough to stop him. Then when I got up to you and saw how he was bleeding I hadn't the heart to try to keep him. Besides, I couldn't have done, anyhow; and he only did it for fun—the ghost, I mean."

Then my senses woke up. "But how did *you* get here?" I asked.

"I followed you," she replied. "I wasn't going to be done out of it, no fear; and I was never far behind you, but you wouldn't have known anything about it if the fellow hadn't damaged you."

I looked at her admiringly. "You are a brick," I said. "But what will Mr. Middleton say when he sees you? By the way," I continued anxiously, "where is he? Something must have happened or he would have been here long ago."

I thought of signalling with my lamp, but the concussion had put the light out and we had no matches. There was nothing for it but to shout, and shouting hurt me.

We walked slowly up the lane, peering into the darkness

of the wood, and calling "Hallo!" at intervals, but there was no reply, and we continued along the highroad until we came to a group of three men who were evidently waiting for us. Two of them I recognised as Sir George's keepers; the other was Mr. Middleton.

It was evident that none of them was in the best of tempers, but after we had explained matters Mr. Middleton burst out laughing and the air cleared considerably. "I'm sore, boys," he said. "I said somebody would be sore before the night was out. 'Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein,' and I'm not the only one who's sore, eh, Johnson? However, here's some golden salve, and we'll cry quits if you like, and keep it to ourselves." He gave them each a half-sovereign, and harmony was restored.

It appeared that Mr. Middleton had caught sight of the ghost on its appearance and had crept forward towards it with the utmost caution, going down sometimes on hands and knees for the purpose. He had the stock of the whip in his right hand, and when he answered my whistle he was quite near to the object of his search.

Then, all at once, he became conscious of another black form in front of him, with its back in his direction. It, too, was stooping and was close to the tree in whose branches the ghost's head was suspended. The ghost and his master had been run to earth.

Tightening his hold upon the whip, Mr. Middleton sprang to his feet and lashed the man's back, then seized his collar in a strong grip. Before he could even see his prisoner's face, however, two unseen hands tightened across his throat from behind, and he found himself forced, choking, upon his back. Then the man he had assaulted, mad with rage and pain, knelt upon his chest, stuffed his cap into his mouth to prevent him crying for help, and gave him measure for measure with his own whip. He struggled in vain, for he was in the grip of powerful men,

who finally pinioned him securely and led him off. It was not until they reached the highroad that they discovered the identity of their prisoner. Explanations had followed and had been surlily received on both sides. Each had been hunting the same quarry, and each had been deprived of it by the other. The keeper had just been about to seize the ghost, or rather the ghost's owner, when Mr. Middleton's whip had lashed his back. The other keeper, meanwhile, had tracked Mr. Middleton and had felt sure that he was on the heels of a poacher. It was a comedy of errors in which only one of the actors—or two, if Victoria is to be included—had come out uninjured.

Despite the bribing of the keepers to secrecy, an exaggerated version of the truth leaked out and there was much merriment in the village at Mr. Middleton's expense. The ghost was easily found—a long, blackened prop supporting a length of dirty white calico topped by a black card outlined and sketched in with phosphorus—but its owner escaped. There were no more ghosts in Brier Dene, however, for many a long day.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. MIDDLETON'S NEW YEAR MESSAGE

EARLY in the following year, and before the festive season ended, Mr. Middleton startled his work-people at Brier Dene by inviting them to have tea with him in the Board School, which was the largest room available for the purpose. We all felt that so unusual an event portended a pronouncement of some importance, and there were very few who were prepared to regard it as an entertainment arising simply out of the goodwill of their employer. Mr. Middleton was known to be generous in his way, but when he went so far as to offer "summat for nowt" those who thought they knew him began to search for motives.

The principal wiseacres were certain that the forthcomlng treat was connected with a circumstance that had occasioned no little excitement in the village—nothing less, indeed, than the purchase of land for the erection of another mill. Some of them knew something of the man who was to run it, Marsden by name, who was reputed to be what we should now call a "hustler."

"He'll be goin' to warn us, like, will David," said one man in my hearing; "he's none t' sort to stand competition without puttin' his word in. We shall get t' straight tip o' Saturda'."

It amused me to watch the older "hands" when Mr. Middleton arrived on the eventful day. They stood together in a small group at the farther end of the room, and I knew that they were there to read in their master's face an

indication of his mood. I could myself interpret its language fairly well by this time. If the lips should be tightly compressed and the head tilted a little to one side, then the atmosphere was likely to be sultry. If in addition he should avoid those whom he liked and make himself agreeable to those whom he usually avoided, and especially if his face should be grey and his eyes half-closed, then there would certainly be a storm.

He was laughing easily, however, when he swung through the door, and the way he thumped Joss on the back and inquired concerning the state of his appetite set many a mind at rest.

"He's in a good humour, is t' boss, seemin'ly," said Martin, the oldest of the overlookers; "it 'ud look as if we were bahn to hev summat speshul."

"Aye, there'll be no cursin' an' swearin' to-night," said a younger colleague.

"'Cursin' an' swearin'!' What d'ye mean by that, lad? I'll tak' my oath David never used a swear-word i' his life."

"There's different ways o' cursin', an' when David's that way out 'e sends you somewheer wi' his eyes if 'e doesn't wi' his tongue; an 'e looks as if 'e'd 'elp you there wi' his foot. However, it seems to be 'set fair' just now, so we've no 'casion to bother."

Three tables had been placed longitudinally down the room, with one transversely at their head, and these had already been filled with the loads of good things David's liberality had provided.

Already the seats were fairly well filled, for it was known that one "sitting-down" would not suffice for the two hundred and fifty or more guests who formed the staff of the mills.

Mr. Middleton moved about the room nodding to one and exchanging a word of greeting with another, and stopping by the side of some of the older ones for a longer chat. He was in

high spirits and his hearty laugh rang out above the general din of conversation.

By and bye he came upon Lizzie Nelson. She was one of the helpers and was returning to the "cutting-up room" when he crossed her path.

"Well, Lizzie," he said heartily, holding out his hand, for Lizzie was one of his favourites, or had been until her sad lapse into popish practices; "how are you?"

"I am very well, thank you, sir," replied Lizzie; "I hope you are the same."

"Oh yes, I'm all right," he said, and was preparing to move on when Lizzie hesitatingly stopped him.

"Well, what is it, Lizzie?" he inquired.

"I wondered if I might be so bold, Mr. Middleton," the young woman faltered, "as to ask you if you'd altered your mind about the chapel, sir." It was evidently a trial for her to speak, and a tear showed in the corner of her eye.

"Have you altered your mind about that tomfoolery, Lizzie? As soon as ever your people stop their monkey-tricks and learn to worship like sensible Christians I'll see what I can do for you."

The girl cast her eyes down, but she spoke bravely:

"We have struggled very 'ard, sir, and we all do our best. But we're only workin'-people, and the decoratin' cost us a lot o' money, and it makes the debt heavy. We can't prosper wi' such a millstone round our necks."

"There's an easy way of getting rid of it, Lizzie. How much is the debt, did you say?"

"It is nearly a hundred and fifty pounds, sir, includin' the decoratin'."

"And you expected me to give you fifty. Well, look here, I've always had a soft spot for you, and for Zion as well. The minute you come to me and tell me you've dropped this silly nonsense I'll give you a cheque for the whole hundred and fifty."

He looked down at her, but she did not speak and her eyes were still bent upon the ground.

"You don't say anything?" he inquired impatiently.

"It's very good of you, sir," she replied at last; "and I don't know what to say, hardly. We should all praise the Lord and be ever so grateful if you'd do this great kindness for us; but since we started brightenin' the service a bit we've laid hold of a lot o' the young people, and some of them's been brought in, and it does seem as if we'd been led; it really does, Mr. Middleton. I wish, sir, you wouldn't ask us to go back. I can't think it 'ud be right."

"Very well, Lizzie, you must please yourselves." Mr. Middleton was in a very good temper to-day or his equanimity would have been sorely disturbed. "If you were to blacken your faces and sing Christy Minstrel songs you would get bigger crowds of young people still, no doubt. But you won't pay for them with my money. If you're going to call the tune you must pay the piper."

"Shoo's been at 'im agen," said 'Tilda, who had been a silent witness of the scene from the distance of a few yards.

"Aye, but she's getten nowt," returned Bella; "ye can't move yond when he's setten 'isself."

When the clatter of knives and forks was silenced Mr. Middleton rose and the tumult ceased.

He had been occupying the centre seat at the table at the top of the room, and he was easily seen and heard by all.

"There's another 'sitting-down,' I know," he said, when the cheering had subsided; "but I think everybody is here and I will not take up much time in saying what I have to say. You all know that I have something to say. My old friend and yours, Seth Halstead, told me before I had been in the room many minutes that when you see weft you can guess bobbins, so I may as well tell you what the bobbins are.

"Some of you think it's about the new mill. Well, it isn't. If any of you want to go there when it's ready, off you go.

David Middleton doesn't want anybody who doesn't want him. You cheer? Thank you. As long as I keep my looms going you have no occasion to leave, that is, if you behave yourselves; and please God my looms will be kept going, good trade or bad, in the future as they have been in the past. So we needn't trouble our heads about Mr. Marsden and his new mill.

"They say, you know, that no Broadbeck business man ever admits that trade is good, but I'm not going to deny that I have been doing pretty well, and I have been wondering how I could arrange to share the benefit with you. I thought that would fetch you, but I'm not going to turn the concern into a 'Co-op.,' so don't run away with that idea.

"But I tell you what I have decided to do in order to encourage thrift among you. I am going to offer to be your banker; and any money you care to deposit with me shall bear interest at the rate of five per cent. per annum. Some of you don't know what that means, I can see, but it means that if you put in one hundred pounds you get five pounds added every year, and so on. That's more than the Post Office gives you; and the old stockings some of you keep your money in don't give you any more, do they?

"But that isn't all. I'm going to start every one of you, from the youngest weft-lad to old Martin here, with a nest-egg. I'm going to open your account with five shillings for every year you've been in my employ. Wait a bit, you can clap when I've done. That means that Martin, who has been with us forty years, will get ten pounds; and his grandson, who has hardly been with us forty minutes, will get five shillings as a special favour.

"I've had bank-books prepared and you can get them in the office at the Valley Mill at any time now, and you can pay in and draw out whenever you like—of course I mean at convenient times; but I've had the particulars printed on the covers of your books,

"Just a word more. If any of you think I want your money for capital, keep it. I've more capital already than I need, and I want nobody's money. If you're suspicious, stick to your old stockings, and let your five-shilling pieces accumulate. That's all I have to say."

He sat down, and his workpeople clapped until their arms ached. In that moment he had his reward.

Whilst the tables were being cleared and replenished, those whose wants had been satisfied withdrew into the crisp open air and discussed the proposal. It had been arranged that there should be a meeting with impromptu addresses and a little music as soon as the tables could be removed; and in the interval Sam Lightfoot and one or two others of his kind betook themselves to the Horse and Jockey, where the atmosphere was conducive to impartial and thorough investigation proceeding along the lines of debate.

Unusual emotion had apparently brought about a parched condition of the pharynx, and mugs of beer were called for to relieve the disorder.

The landlord and the company were made acquainted with the situation, and pipes were charged with great deliberation. It was Tim who at a later date told me what happened.

"Well, an' what does it all mean, Sam?" inquired Dick, the farmer's man at the Hall, who had no acquaintance with mills or banks.

"It means," said Sam, "'at I'm goin' to put my little bit in afore next week's out. An' it means 'at next year at this time I s'all hev—well, niver mind how much, but a shillin' added to ivery pound, let alone what David puts in for me."

"I don't see, Sam, but what that's a bit o' all right, isn't it?" said the landlord.

"It's a bit o' all right, landlord, is that; an' I'm not denyin' it."

"Is there naught at t' back of it, think ye?" inquired the smith suggestively. "He's a Yorkshireman, is David, an' you know t' old saying, 'If you do owt for nowt do it for yoursen.' Now *I* should be wanting to look round t' corner afore I put my brass in."

"Ye could please yerself," said Sam, who was always easily provoked, "same as I shall."

"But I allus thowt ye weren't so up o' David," continued the smith, somewhat nettled at being dismissed so curtly.

"I aren't up of 'im," growled Sam. "I wish blazes 'ad 'im; but I'll give the devil 'is due, an' what David says 'e'll do, 'e'll do. He's a rank old 'umbug, but 'e's straight as any man livin'; I'll say that for 'im."

"Tha's allus sayin' 'e's an 'umbug, Sam," said one of his mates. "I don't see myself but what 'e's right enough. Nah, wheer is he an 'umbug? Tell me that."

"Where is 'e an 'umbug?" repeated Sam, groping round for words to express his ill-defined feelings; "where isn't 'e an 'umbug? Isn't it 'umbug to pretend to be religious an' put up prayers in a prayer-meetin' same as 'e wor a saint, an' then go about like a lunatic if some on 'em chonces to tread on his corns?"

"Well now, come, what does ta mean by treadin' on 'is corns? How wad tha like thy corns treadin' on? It 'ud mak' ony man stamp abaht, saint or sinner."

"What do I mean?" snorted Sam. "Why, look at Zion! There's been naught to 'old a can'le to Zion up to a bit sin'. He's preyched for 'em, an' ta'en t' chair for 'em, an' I knawn't what 'e 'asn't done; an' now, becos they've started to sing a hanthem or summat of a Sunda' night, he buttons his breeches-pocket up an' they aren't to 'ave another penny. What's that but 'umbug?" Sam pushed out the spittoon with his foot and discharged his contempt into it.

"Let's see, Sam," said the landlord, with a contemplative eye turned upon the curling tobacco smoke; "doesn't Liz Nelson sing i' t' Zion choir?"

The other men laughed, and Sam's choler rose. "What's she got to do wi' it? But look what 'e did about t' Infirmary; ye can't get ovver that. 'Ere 'e goes an' gives 'em fifty pound a year as far back as ye can go, an' becos they're goin' to build a new wing wi' brass 'at a brewer's left 'em they aren't to 'ave another red cent."

"Well, it's his own brass," argued the smith.

"We know it's 'is own brass; but if tha happened to be lamed an' they wor to tak' tha to t' hospital what diff'rence would it mak' whether t' bed they laid tha on wor paid for by a brewer or a spinner? I call that 'umbug!"

"Well, right enough," said the landlord, whose prejudices were naturally in favour of Sam's argument; "it does seem a narrow way o' lookin' at things, does that."

"Narrah!" replied Sam, warming to his subject. "Now ye've 'it the word, landlord. Ye've scored a bull's-eye this time. Religion's all right wi' David if it's 'is religion; an' chapil-goers is all right as long as they'll dance to t' tune 'e fiddles—he said as much this blessed afternoon: he said it 'isself"—and Sam seized on the recollection and hugged it with glee—"I 'eard 'im wi' my own ears. But once let 'em start a tune o' their own, an' he starts kickin' t' furnitur' about."

"Well, anyway," said his mate, rising, "I'm off back to 'ear if he's owt more to say. He's none a bad sort, isn't David."

"I wish the old lad 'ad 'im," said Sam, rising. "Tak' thy time, I'm goin' back an' all; and 'umbug or no 'umbug, I puts my little bit in this next week."

CHAPTER XV

SETH HALSTEAD SPEAKS HIS MIND

IT must have been some six or seven weeks after the events last recorded that something happened which I can never forget, for it was to affect what Mr. Middleton at any rate came to look upon as his destiny.

During the months that had succeeded our night adventure with the ghost I had grown rapidly, and although I put on an inch in an incredibly short time, the growth in stature was perhaps the least remarkable feature of my development. I became a man, consciously, for though I had always been older than my years I had never "launched out into my own deep," as I now did. I think the confidence my employer showed in me, coupled with a kindness that was at times almost fatherly, contributed to this; and I began to see that I might come to occupy an important place in the firm of D. & D. Middleton. I was keenly interested in my work and satisfied with it, much to Victoria's surprise, and also, I think, to Mr. Truman's.

It would be a mistake to infer from that, however, that I was becoming indifferent to the attractions of books or to the call of Nature, for I found a deepening delight in both; and Mr. Truman helped me with a discernment and deftness that I was quite unable to appreciate at the time. I kept company with the best thought of all the ages, and my mental horizon widened from week to week. They were rich and happy days, flushed with the tints of sunrise, and almost cloudless.

As I look back I can see that I was growing, too, in that kind of spirituality that soaks into a man's nature and becomes character before he knows it. The debt I owe in this connection to Seth and Susan Halstead I cannot compute; yet religion, which was to them the very end and essence of life, was never thrust down my throat. I may go further and say that it was seldom spoken about unless direct reference was made to the subject, but the old people not only let their light shine but had the secret of making it incandescent and attractive. I sometimes went to chapel with them, but I never became what they called "a joined member," though I think I should have done so if the thought of my father's loyalty to the National Church and the remembrance of the saintly old Innershaw rector had not restrained me.

My obligation to Seth Halstead was not limited to his unconscious influence, either. I often discussed my reading with him, and profitably, for he was quick-witted and critical in his way; but he helped me most of all in business matters—in fact he, more than any other, taught me the theory of the business, kindling his enthusiasm afresh that he might fire mine.

All this is introductory to what I set out to narrate, but some of it at least will explain why I was allowed to be an auditor when Seth Halstead spoke his mind one Saturday afternoon in February.

It had become a custom for me to have tea with the old people on Saturdays, and on this particular day Mr. Middleton had stopped behind to make calculations, and had asked me to assist him by checking his additions and in other minor ways. When he had finished we walked up the lane together, and finding that I was going to the Halsteads, he put his head in at the door.

It was five o'clock and the table was spread for tea. "You might as well have a cup, David," said Seth; and

when Susan added her invitation Mr. Middleton was easily persuaded.

"You're still cook-housemaid, I see, Seth," he said, as the old man opened the oven door and brought out a "hot cake."

Seth said nothing for a moment but poured a little water from the kettle into the slop-basin and placed the plate upon it. When he had returned the kettle to the hob he said:

"Oh, aye. I nobbut want a cap wi' strings to it, an' a pinny wi' frills at t' front, an' I should pass for one o' your servant-lasses. Now draw your chairs up, both of you, an' reach to. You'll happen start us, David?"

Mr. Middleton said grace, and for some time the conversation was of a desultory character, but when the meal was nearly over Seth turned to his master and said:

"They're framing well wi' t' new mill, David. They've started on t' foundations. We shall be having t' roof-tree on before t' summer ends."

It was a distasteful topic, and Mr. Middleton's reply was curt. "Let them get it on. They'll maybe wish they'd never seen it before they've done."

As I glanced at Seth I saw an uneasy look creep into his eyes. "He's no fool, by all accounts, isn't young Marsden. They say he'll make it go if any man can," he continued.

"There's such a thing as making it go to smash," commented Mr. Middleton; "but anyhow he's the world before him, like everybody else, and I've no objection. What's worrying you?"

Seth looked at him steadily and paused before saying:

"Nay, I don't know 'at I'm worrying exactly, but I think a deal o' t' old firm, an' I want nowt to injure it."

"What should injure it?" The question was snapped out.

"Well, what about weavers? It's nobbut a small place,

isn't Brier Dene, an' I've known when they've been bad to get; but how will it be when there's another mill as big as ours an' no more hands to feed it?"

"It will be bad for the new mill, Seth. Look here, man: ever since you knew D. & D. Middletons' has the firm ever allowed its looms to stand? Through good trade and bad trade these looms have been kept going and the weavers have never had to play for a day. Is that so?"

"Aye, that's true enough, an' ye've a right to be proud of it; but——"

Mr. Middleton interrupted him; he was losing patience.

"There are no 'buts.' Do you think if Marsden was to be fool enough to offer them more money that my hands would be fool enough to go? Not they; they have more sense for themselves. They know which side their bread is buttered on." Mr. Middleton turned his chair round and spread his legs over the hearth, and Seth drew up to the fire too.

"Well, but, David, just a minute," he said. "I'm an old man an' I've time to think, an' I hear a deal o' what's said. They tell me 'at trade's shifting, an' buyers is going in more for fancies, an' by what I make out Marsden is fitting up for fancies. If we have to go t' same road ye'll none be able to keep thousands on thousands o' pieces i' stock same as we have done."

Mr. Middleton's eyes hardened.

"So you've heard this tale about fancies, have you? and it's scared you. I should have thought you had a steadier head, Seth. Look here." He brought his fist down upon the table at his side so that the pots rattled; "D. & D. Middleton aren't in the habit of being dictated to. For fifty years and more we've had, as nobody knows better than you, a half-dozen standard cloths, and we've sold millions of 'em; and we shall sell millions when these fancies have been forgotten and Marsden, and fellows like

him, have lost all their money. I lead, I don't follow. I thought you knew that."

The old man looked troubled. "Of course you're among it," he said; "an' you know t' market. But I was only thinkin' if it did happen to turn to fancies it 'ud be out o' t' question to weave for stock."

"I'm not denying, mind you," said Mr. Middleton in a slightly softer tone, "that there is a demand for fancies just now, and we aren't as busy on the old lines as we might be, though I've nothing much to complain about; but I'm stocking thousands of pieces in the warehouse at Broadbeck and they'll be there to sell when my competitors have to start and put the warps in. And I'll go on till I've got thirty thousand pieces in stock before I'll stop a single weaver. There's no fear about our stuff selling. If the public doesn't know what's good for 'em they must be taught."

The troubled look had not left the old man's eyes, but he did not speak immediately. As Mr. Middleton also remained moodily silent Susan interposed:

"You won't be 'eadstrong, will you, David? Don't do nothing to bring trouble on you an' Mrs. David and the dear child. That's what Seth means."

Mr. Middleton shook himself and laughed. "No; I'll look after myself, Susan; but David Middleton likes to be a leader. He isn't within sight of ruin yet. There are a few thousands in the bank to pay wages with for a long time to come, and I owe nothing worth talking about. So you may sleep easy in your bed."

Seth looked up again. I saw that he had more upon his mind, and I admired his boldness. I had never seen my employer tackled in this manner, and it frightened as well as pleased me.

"You don't mind me speaking i' front o' Louis?" he asked. "I reckon myself t' lad's safe enough."

"What do you want to say?" inquired Mr. Middleton touchily. "Louis is all right. Get on with it."

The old man still gazed earnestly at his master in a way that was disconcerting. "Do you do as much as ever wi' Blunt and Sharpes?" he asked.

"More," replied Mr. Middleton. "They're not as busy just now, perhaps, as they have been, but they nearly keep us going at times."

"I've an uneasy feeling about 'em now an' again," said Seth calmly. "I couldn't explain it, but there's summat about Mr. Blunt 'at I never did like."

"Confound it, Seth!" said Mr. Middleton testily; "what's taken you this afternoon? I thought you'd retired from business. If any other man had said what you've just said he'd have suffered for it. Mr. Blunt was my father's best friend as well as his best customer, and he is my friend too. All the town trusts him, as men do trust those who are upright. Leave me to manage my own affairs, and keep your confounded croaking to yourself."

He was really angry and he looked sternly into Seth's eyes. I, for my part, was trembling a little with excitement; but the old man did not flinch.

"I had it on my mind to say these things, David. I've never breathed a word to any other soul, not even to Susan, and what I've said 'll do no harm, I hope. If it does I shall be downright sorry; but I've done it for t' best."

The storm-cloud lifted a little on Mr. Middleton's brow, but he still spoke sulkily:

"Well, is there aught else you've been brooding over? I may as well have it all whilst I'm here."

Again there was silence for a moment whilst Seth's eyes searched those of his master.

"There is something else. Has Joss said anything to you about Sam Lightfoot lately?"

"Well, nothing much. He drops hints now and again; but Joss has his knife into Sam. What about him?"

Seth paused and appeared to weigh his words.

"It's a serious thing, David, to rob a man of his character, an' nob'dy knows better nor me how folks likes to tittle-tattle, 'specially women. But it's just as wrong to hide it if there's aught 'at should be said, an' I should ha' told you before if I hadn't known 'at you were a bit hasty."

"Go on; tell me now."

"Well, it isn't 'at there's fairly aught to tell; but there's hints an' rewmurs 'at all isn't right wi' t' waste 'at Sam weighs out."

A change came over Mr. Middleton's face. The look of irritation was succeeded by one of severity. His eyes narrowed and his lips tightened. He bent forward attentively and waited for more.

"They don't say straight out 'at he's taking it; but there's no mistaking what they mean."

"Does Joss know?"

"I amn't sure. Joss is mostly at t' Valley Mill an' Sam's at t' Upper. An' besides, Joss thinks 'at you believe he isn't fair to Sam, an' he's stalled o' bothering."

"Oh, is he?" My master turned to me. "Have you heard anything of this, Louis?"

I could answer truthfully that I had not, though when I came to put two and two together I knew that Seth was right about the rumours.

Mr. Middleton became thoughtful. He gazed into the fire, and his jaw stiffened. "If I catch him at that game," he said deliberately, "I'll have him locked up."

Seth intimated that Sam was sure to be overtaken by that fate before long—Bob Berry and Sir George's new head-keeper had their eyes on him; but Mr. Middleton was sceptical. Sam's poaching proclivities ought to have had

that result years before. I believe Mr. Middleton, at the heart of him, put poaching among the venial sins.

"He drinks yet, I suppose?" he asked.

Seth looked at me and we both smiled. "He's no teetotaler," I replied. "They know him very well at the Horse and Jockey."

A softer note came into Mr. Middleton's voice, but his lips were still tight.

"You know why I've borne with him all these years, Seth? Why I've tried to believe in him?"

"I can guess."

"For his father's sake. His father is as old as you, isn't he?"

"Older by two years."

"I'm not surprised. And he had the position Sam holds for thirty years, I daresay?"

"Five an' thirty; an' as steady an' faithful a servant as D. an' D. Middleton ever had. You don't want to forget that, David."

Seth tried to look into his master's eyes, but Mr. Middleton was wilfully blind.

"A Church member, isn't he?"

"He leads a class at Zion, does Abe. You'd break his heart if you locked Sam up; an' who'd give him a job at after? It 'ud be beggary for t' lad." Seth's voice was wistful.

"You reap what you sow, Seth," replied Mr. Middleton. "And yet the Psalmist said he had not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread! What about Abe's seed? What do you make of it, Seth?"

"All I make of it is 'at David hadn't seen as much as some of us. *I've* seen more than one; an' some of David's own turned out bad enough. I'm concerned for Abe. That's why I named it to you as much as aught."

Susan had been rocking herself gently and she now put

her hand on Mr. Middleton's arm. The tears stood in the eyes which were fixed upon his face as she said gently:

"I always turn to our Lord when there are things in the Bible I can't understand, an' then you can't get far wrong, David. And He was always kind an' forgiving, wasn't He? He cured by kindness. 'Neither do I condemn thee,' He said to that poor soul that they were going to stone, 'Go in peace and sin no more.'"

Mr. Middleton scarcely seemed to hear her. From the look in his eyes I judged he was following out a train of thought of his own.

"These things puzzle me," he said. "I'm not going to begin to doubt the Bible at my time of life, but there are some things in it that are hard to explain. This is one of them."

"And there's that other thing the dear lamb is bothering her head about," said Susan; "because good people die young sometimes and are poor, and the Bible says different. I tell her she isn't to let it worry her, because them 'at said it, choose how good they were, could make mistakes i' them days same as i' these. I tell her to go by what our Lord says."

Mr. Middleton roused himself. "What wickedness are you putting into the child's head?" he said so sternly that Susan shrank from him. "'Mistakes'! You don't know what you are saying. I thought you would have known better!" Mr. Middleton was very angry.

Seth leaned forward, his hands on his knees. "But just wait a minute, David," he said. "Suppose you was to lose your money, as lots o' good men has done, do you want me to believe 'at we should have to take it 'at you'd lost your religion? Come now."

Again Mr. Middleton's jaw stiffened. "That's a matter I'm trying to make my mind up about," he said.

"You might happen serve the Lord better i' that way,

you know, David," pleaded the old woman. "He told the rich young man to sell all he had and give it away, you remember. I think it's best to go by what our Lord said; I'm sure I hope you'll never have to be poor, but if you ever are I hope it won't turn you hard."

Mr. Middleton laughed—it was like him to laugh at such a juncture. "I hope it won't. I believe you've hit it, Susan, if you are an old heretic. I must be going now, and I'll think it out. If I have to tread the Way of the Winepress, well, I'll tread it. But there's no sign of it so far, in spite of Seth and his 'fancies.' As to Sam Lightfoot, it's as I said just now, a man has to reap what he sows, and if I catch him robbing me he'll go to gaol, that's flat."

CHAPTER XVI

THE ENCOUNTER WITH MR. TRUMAN

CAN anyone who has seen it with open eyes ever forget the coming of spring in the valley of Brier Dene? It is indescribable; it makes one conscious of the poverty of language and the riches of the senses; it makes one believe in God and goodness and the new earth that is to be. My soul used to bound forward to meet it, and I welcomed every herald that proclaimed its approach. Let those smile who will; they have not seen Brier Dene in the month of April.

The opening day of my first spring there I shall never forget, and for more than one reason. I had been over to Broadbeck in the morning and Mr. Middleton offered me a seat in the victoria when I returned in the early afternoon. It had been his intention to drive all the way, but the beauty of the day led him to dismiss Marshall at Cribberley Bridge, and we walked on to Brier Dene by way of Waterfoot and the field path to the woods.

I do not know that Mr. Middleton could have been called a lover of Nature, but he had at any rate a warm admiration for her. The beauties of sky and landscape did not thrill him, but they warmed and softened him and put him in good humour. He was remarkably easy to get on with that day and I am sure that Nature had something to do with it. She was smiling into our faces all the time, coquetting with us openly. The sunshine was brilliant; the clouds were white as wool against a background of blue. A keen wind was blowing, but we walked smartly, and it served to brace us.

A few celandines showed themselves in the grass beneath the hedgerows, and on a low wall in the park there were hundreds of wild strawberry blossoms, shining starlike in the dark shadow cast by thick holly bushes. Across the fields two men were busy hedging, and great piles of branches could be seen here and there awaiting removal. Lark and blackbird carolled for us, and a number of sparrows which had sought this quiet spot to settle a quarrel fought noisily and with much determination at our very feet and refused to be disturbed. Mr. Middleton laughed aloud and forgot to point a moral.

Lambs, looking for all the world like their little brethren of the toy-shops, stood uncertainly near their mothers, in a park-like pasture that was typically English. It is a rich tract of country, without grandeur but full of reposeful beauty; and the eye, following the sweep of the fields, rested on meadows and tilled lands, yellow, green, brown, grey, which rose gently to the horizon.

The woods beyond the little wicket gate seemed almost dark that day, except where the sunshine had spattered the trunks of the trees with white and fallen in dazzling splashes on the ferns that carpeted the earth and were its glory.

Mr. Middleton climbed the steep ascent like a boy. The path, if path it may be called, is over and around a jumbled mass of stones and boulders fixed firmly at all angles and in every fantastic form down the steep slope of the wood; scored and polished less by the foot of man than by the constant action of rain and frost. Around some of them twine the roots of elm and oak; many others are concealed or half-concealed among the millions of waving ferns; a few of huge dimensions tower high above them. I have often wondered what cataclysm of nature flung them there, or in what remote period the ice-flow that brought them from the heights exhausted itself.

We stopped near the top to recover breath—everybody stops at this point, where an entrancing view of the park and the wooded heights in the background, to say nothing of the comfortable-looking Grange which nestles so snugly on the hillside, invites a halt.

"Not so bad, that, Louis, for a young man of fifty-six," said Mr. Middleton.

I smiled in acquiescence. My own pulse was beating rapidly and I marvelled at my companion's agility. I should have liked to say something of how the experiences of the last half-hour had affected me. I did not myself understand my mood. It was as if all Nature, animate and inanimate, were struggling to speak to me; or rather, perhaps, as if I were struggling to interpret Nature's message, spoken in a language of which I knew only the rudiments. I felt, however, that Mr. Middleton would not have understood.

He did not guess my thoughts, but he saw that I was thinking, and he began to speak of the marvellous power and fertility of the Creator in the somewhat pedantic and complacent tone of voice that he always adopted when he spoke on religious subjects. He was never so happy as when he was in the pulpit, and he found his pulpit anywhere.

What he would have gone on to say I suppose I know, as anybody might who is familiar with Mr. Middleton's type; but as we turned to leave we saw Mr. Truman walking slowly towards us, book in hand.

I glanced at my employer and saw his face cloud; and the shadow deepened when it became evident that Mr. Truman meant to join us. It was a curt answer that was given to the newcomer's salutation, but Mr. Truman appeared not to notice it. He turned and walked with us, although Mr. Middleton had quickened his footsteps.

"I have been seeking the opportunity of a chat with you, Mr. Middleton," he began pleasantly. "Could you spare me

half an hour, either at my house or at the mill some day soon ? "

" What's it about ? " inquired Mr. Middleton shortly.

This was too much for our choleric tutor.

" Deuce take it, man, that would come out at the interview, wouldn't it ? I say——"

" Look here, Mr. Truman," interrupted Mr. Middleton, " I may as well warn you that I'm hot-tempered myself, and I won't be sworn at by either you or any man living."

" Hang it, man," replied the other with equal warmth, " do you think I care the tenth part of a barleycorn what kind of temper you've got ? If your temper's as hot as hell —I say if it's as hot as hell——"

Mr. Middleton stopped and pointed in the direction of the wood we had just left. A change had come over him, sudden and complete, and my pulse beat quickly now from another cause than exertion. I am not sure whether the desire to be out of it or to witness what I felt was going to be a battle was my predominant feeling.

Mr. Middleton's head was at its most dangerous angle.

" I believe you were reading, Mr. Truman," he said frigidly. " Don't let us disturb you. There's too much chutney in your conversation to suit my palate to-day. I don't use bad language myself, and I don't choose to associate with those who do. And one final word—I'm very sorry that Louis chooses to do so."

Mr. Truman's mouth opened quickly, but he checked himself and laughed :

" I beg your pardon, Mr. Middleton—I say I beg your pardon, for I respect your principles and I was to blame. Hang it, man, I will use no more formidable oath than ' fiddlesticks.' ' I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove ; I will roar you as 'twere any nightingale.' "

Mr. Truman meant well—it was really his intention to be

conciliatory—but Mr. Middleton threw the peace-offering in the other's face. Unseasonable levity was almost as obnoxious as invective.

"Confound it! Stephen Truman," he said; "am I to be left alone or am I not?"

Mr. Truman had controlled himself. He was, as usual, without hat and he stood with one hand in the pocket of his jacket—for he disdained an overcoat—and smiled on his antagonist.

"So 'Confound it!' is permissible language, is it? Very good; it will suit me as well as any other. We will 'confound' each other and proceed. Are we agreed? for 'shall two walk together except they have agreed?'"

"When you quote Scripture," replied Mr. Middleton, who was unable to resist this temptation, "you might as well quote it correctly. My Bible says, '*Can* two walk together except they *be* agreed?'—and you and I are not likely to agree."

"A mere difference of versions," replied Mr. Truman, waving his book airily. "You are quoting from the Old, I from the New."

I knew we were in for it then. Mr. Middleton looked upon revision of the Bible exactly as most of us would look upon a revised *Hamlet* or a revised *Pilgrim's Progress*. Rumour had it that the minister of Mr. Middleton's church had been forced to abandon the public use of the New Version because his most influential member had issued an ultimatum for its discontinuance, and stopped his contributions pending the acceptance of his demands.

The battle with fists in Nicholson's Court was nothing to the battle in words that now followed. We walked a few yards, then stopped, and the two men gesticulated and argued until impatience drove them a few paces forward.

Again, as in the other fight, I was a spectator, held back now, as then, by the conviction that I could not usefully

interfere; but there is hardly a word of it all that I have forgotten.

"So that's the sort of man you are?" said Mr. Truman, after Mr. Middleton had spent a vast amount of emphasis in explaining his views on revisers and revisions and what ought to be done to both. "Confound it, man, you're as transparent as glass. Your Bible, your faith, and your God were handed down to you by your father with the old oak and the family plate. What is your faith but a tradition? Your Bible, but a book of words? Your God, but a wooden deity? And then you send missionaries to convert idol-worshippers!"

So far as intellect goes they were unequally matched, but I was surprised to find that Mr. Truman's acquaintance with the Bible was as intimate as my master's; all the same, Mr. Middleton, if he had no real convictions but only beliefs and prejudices, was courageous enough in defence of what he held to be truth, and no believer in minced words when he came to state his opinion of his antagonist.

"I don't take my religion, Truman, from a man who doesn't put his head inside a church more than twice in a twelvemonth—unless people lie about you. It needs a good man to preach goodness."

Before we reached the road above the Knoll I had become quite convinced that in spite of the heat of the encounter both men were enjoying the fight, and what was more, that each was beginning to respect the other. It was not that either man yielded an inch of ground, it was simply that he had recognised his opponent's sincerity.

"You're not the only man who thinks me a hypocrite," said Mr. Middleton, as we came to the last stile. He had the tone of the man who enjoys being misrepresented.

"Hypocrite!" exclaimed Mr. Truman. "Look here, Middleton, I am going to speak plainly. You are as sincere an idol-worshipper as ever bowed down before the household

gods his father left him. Confound it, man, you have all the sincerity of the fanatic, and there's no hope for a man like you. You would persecute your parson and think you were doing God service."

"Parson or no parson," replied my master acidly, "he'd hear David Middleton's tongue if he began to lead his flock into poisoned pastures. All the same, Stephen Truman, I respect you more than I did. You are not quite the man I thought you, though your arguments don't move me. You are a cleverer man than I am, but 'let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.'"

"That sword has two edges, David Middleton," replied Mr. Truman, smiling; and we stepped into the road and proceeded a little way in silence. Then Mr. Truman said in a more business-like manner:

"I do not seek that interview I spoke of, Mr. Middleton, in order to discuss religious beliefs. As a matter of fact, I want to speak about these remarkable workpeople of yours, Victoria and Louis."

He just glanced at me as he spoke, and a smile hovered about the corners of his mouth.

"That's a sudden twist, anyhow," said Mr. Middleton, "but curiously enough, I have wanted to see you on that same subject. Cannot you say what you have to say now?"

"Not altogether," he replied. "Hang it, man, the boy is here. But this I will say: they'll both be wasted if left in the mill—I tell you they'll waste their lives. But I leave Louis alone—I say I leave him to go his own road; but Victoria must be sent to college."

My heart stood still for a second; then I went hot with excitement. As for Mr. Middleton, his eyes opened to their fullest extent, but one word only escaped his lips, "What?"

"I say the girl must be sent to college. I haven't said a word to them—Louis knows I haven't—but the girl shall not waste her talents and her life. I say she must be sent to

college, and—well, the long and short of it is this—either you send her or I do, for go she shall."

It was impossible to ascertain from Mr. Middleton's expression whether he was pleased or no. Astonishment had taken away his breath. "Why, bless my life!" he ejaculated at length; "it isn't more than a year or two ago that I picked the girl out of the gutter. What crazy notion have you got hold of? Victoria to go to college!"

Mr. Truman was calm enough now. He placed his hand on Mr. Middleton's arm and said:

"Listen, Middleton! In two years' time that gutter girl of yours will matriculate, and she will get through easily—I tell you she will swim through. After that she must go to college. She shall go—the only question is, who is to send her? I'll do it—hang it, I'll be pleased to do it, but you've the first right: you discovered her."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Middleton, who had not yet recovered himself. "I must have time to think this over. I'll come to see you on Tuesday if that will suit you. That beats everything—Victoria to go to college."

We had reached the lane that leads down to the mill, and the two men shook hands.

"On Tuesday then," said Mr. Truman—and to me, "Not a word about this to Victoria, boy—I say, not a word to her at present."

Mr. Middleton was silent as we walked up the lane, but the look in his eyes was not without promise for Victoria's future.

For myself, I could think of nothing else, and I hardly knew whether the emotion of pleasure or pain was uppermost in my feelings.

CHAPTER XVII

IN BELLA'S COTTAGE

WHAT happened at that eventful interview I never knew, but two or three weeks later Victoria came home with a strained look in her eyes and left her tea almost untouched. I felt sure Mr. Middleton had been speaking to her, but I asked no questions; and when the tea-things had been put away Victoria suggested that we should go into the wood, and there she told me all about it. It was the close of a pleasant April day and the fresh young growth everywhere about us was good to see, but we had no eyes for it just then. Victoria scarcely spoke until we reached a sycamore that had been newly felled, and there we sat down and the tears came into her eyes. I had never seen her cry before, but Mr. Middleton's kindness and generosity had overwhelmed her. "I feel swept off my feet, Louis," she said. "I can't believe it yet. I keep thinking I shall wake up and find it's been a dream." She became almost sentimental in that hour as she pictured the pit from which she had been digged and the possibilities that lay before her; but it was easy to see that she rather dreaded the separation from me. We were the best of chums and we loved each other with all our hearts. Neither of us had found another companion of our own age nor felt the need of one; and the fortunate circumstance of Mr. Truman's tutorship had bridged the distance that separated us and had grounded our friendship on a surer basis. Victoria had left me far behind in learning—though,

indeed, I made no attempt to keep pace with her—yet she never gave herself airs or made me conscious of inferiority, but deferred to my judgment to a degree that would have been amusing if I had not accepted it, as most boys do, as the most natural thing in the world. We were all in all to each other, and, young as I was, I looked forward to the day when we should be man and wife; and it was very agreeable to me to dwell upon the advantages of this college course. And so I kissed her and wiped the tears away and spoke lightly of the separation that was coming, and that it really hurt me to contemplate.

Victoria jumped up at last. "I couldn't study, Louis," she said. "My head's in a whirl. What do you say to a stiff walk round the Prospect?"

We set off at once, skirting the wood and climbing the steep shoulder of the hill without slackening our pace or pausing for breath. My arm was through hers, and she gave it an affectionate squeeze now and then as we spoke of the future. A bright light filled her eyes, which now showed no trace of tears, and I knew that her heart was dancing triumphantly: knew also that she had neither doubts nor fears.

There are benches here and there on the path that leads round the top of the Prospect, and there we sat down and became conscious of the sunset. The sky was washed in a delicate shade of amber, deepening towards the zenith into opalescent tints of grey, green, and blue. Clouds, light and fleecy as thistledown, salmon-tinted, hung motionless in the still air, and evening brooded over the pastures and the farmsteads and the woods stirring with new life, and the grey-brown moors beyond.

I took Victoria's hand. "Isn't it peaceful and prophetic?" I asked. "Don't you feel the power and the glory of it? Doesn't it speak to you and tell you things not found in books?"

She smiled. "Well, it's beautifully done, anyhow, but don't you think it spoils it a bit when you know what causes it? Painted skies are tongue-tied to me, Louis; but if that is prophetic what do you make of this?"

She had risen and was facing west, and I turned my head in that direction. The sky behind us was bursting into flame, with great gashes and rents of gold and copper and of every shade between. A mere arc of sun burned scarlet below the gold, and underneath it mass on mass of black cloud, with the hue of steel in the blackness, like battalions of troops which wait the order to advance and change the peaceful eventide into the night of storm and destruction.

"What do you make of that?" repeated Victoria, laughing. "It looks like bad weather, doesn't it?"

"Let us go down," I said.

We found mother in our neighbours' home. Bella and 'Tilda had finished "cleaning the house"—a work of supererogation which took place every Friday in the year except Good Friday—and all three were sitting in the firelight when we entered.

"Nay, I'm blessed!" ejaculated 'Tilda as we stepped within the door, "talk about t' Owd Lad an' ye soon 'ear 'is clogs clatterin'. Come in an' sit ye down for a toathri minutes. We wor just talkin' about ye."

Mother was knitting, and Bella was mending stockings. 'Tilda had apparently nothing to do and her tongue was unusually loose and frolicsome, which had always the result of making her companion taciturn. We drew two stools up to the hearth, well content, for once, to abandon our books.

"What were you saying about us?" inquired Victoria.

"Ye'd 'appen like to knaw," said 'Tilda, "but it wor summat about young fowk startin' courtin' i' good time, an' your mother said she 'oped she'd live to see 'em wed."

"For shame, 'Tilda! You know I said naught o' t'

sort," mother broke in, though her gentle smile showed that she was not annoyed; "I told you I didn't bother my head wi' t' futur'. Some folk is always straining their eyes into t' dark like a ingine-driver, but I try to live a day at a time. I'm not saying 'at it wouldn't suit me well enough to see 'em wed, but there's time for lots to happen afore that day comes, an'——"

"Oh, don't talk about us," interrupted Victoria, "or I shall go in home. Talk about something sensible."

"It won't hev to be owt about weddin's, then," grunted Bella. "I'm capped 'Tilda hesn't more sense nor to start o' that subject afore young fowk."

"Oh, you shut up," retorted 'Tilda pleasantly. "If you'd nobbut hed a young man o' yer awn, Bella, it 'ud ha' mellowed ye a bit. It caps me what t' men wor doin' when ye wor a lass. I'll warrant there's some poor fella livin' 'lone an' miserable 'at might ha' had a 'appy 'ome if he'd nobbut ta'en up wi' a pleasant-faced lass like ye. He'd ha' had both a pictur' an' a talkin'-machine at t' side of 'is 'earthstone if ye'd ta'en pity on 'im, Bella."

Bella tightened her lips. "It's n' use sayin' nowt," she said. "There's odd times when 'Tilda goes reyt off 'er chump, an' owt to be shut up in a 'sylum."

"I thowt she wor bringin' it off once," continued 'Tilda, who was in her most provocative mood. "There wor a middle-aged chap come about ten year sin'—but I'd 'appen better say no more about it."

"I'll throw ye on t' fire back if ye don't ho'd yer din," said Bella, whose face was like thunder.

"I fancy wi' some fowk it comes on sudden, this courtin' business, same as t' distemper i' dogs," 'Tilda went on mischievously; "an' it's best to chain 'em up while they get it ovvered wi'. I kep' Bella chained up, as ye may say——"

I wish to goodness thy tongue wor chained up," said

Bella savagely. "It 'ud tak' a better nor ye to keep me chained up if I wanted to be lowse."

Mother made an attempt to still the rising storm.

"She likes her joke, does 'Tilda; but it's nature for folk to get wed, an' I shall allus thank the Lord myself 'at I had a good 'usband. Louis' father an' me thought a deal o' each other, if we sparred a bit now an' then. There were some o' my side 'at said I throwed myself away when I wed him, an' I did sometimes wonder myself if we just fit one another. But a misfit's better nor no fit at all, an' if folks has anything about 'em they can soon shape theirselves."

"I wonder how Sam Lightfoot an' Liz Nelson 'ud shape theirselves," said 'Tilda.

"She isn't likely to have him, is she?" inquired Victoria anxiously.

"I'm sure she won't," I took it upon myself to answer.

"Yer sure o' nowt o' t' sort," snapped Bella viciously; "ye never know what daft tricks women 'll do if a man talks soft to 'em."

'Tilda laughed. "That's reyt, Bella," she said; "I knew ye wor o' my side at t' bottom o' ye. Lasses like Liz gets led away wi' bein' tender-'earted. They're all alike, is t' men, when they want owt. They can oil their tongues wi' 'oney till they've got what they're after, an' then they don't bother to oil 'em at all. He'll tell 'er t' same old tale 'at all wastrels tell, 'at her weddin' 'im is t' only thing 'at'll save him from ruin. I durst bet owt he'll get round 'er at t' finish."

"But why should he want Lizzie?" said Victoria. "She isn't his sort at all. I can't understand it."

"Aw, it's easy enough answered, is that," said Bella sardonically. "Shoo's a pretty face, an' her mother 'as a tidy bit o' brass."

"Aye," added 'Tilda, "an' Sam rades o' all t' rest o' fowk—he wants what's bad to get, an' t' ofter shoo refuses

'im t' more he thinks ther's nowt else worth 'avin'. He isn't by 'isself by a long way. An' I dar'say at t' bottom he'd like to hev a good lass for a wife. 'E'd be reyt enough, would Sam, if 'e didn't drink so mich."

"And poach?" I suggested.

"Powching's nowt," said 'Tilda airily; "what's a rabbit or two? An' besides, as I say, Liz 'ud 'appen mend 'im; ther's niver no tellin'."

Mother shook her head. "It's ill for t' fly 'at sets out to convert t' spider," she said. "I shouldn't like to see a lass o' mine get her feet fast into that web. I should think she hadn't a thousand-to-one chance."

"I know some 'at 'ud like her to risk it," said 'Tilda, with the expression of one who had a secret and might be persuaded to divulge it.

We all looked at her inquiringly.

"Mrs. Middleton!" She shut her mouth with a snap and confirmed the statement with a nod of her head.

We raised a chorus of protest, but 'Tilda remained unmoved. "I know an' you don't," she said; "an' I'm none goin' to tell ye 'ow I know, but it's reyt what I'm tellin' ye. Mrs. Middleton knew Sam's mother an' shoo's sorry for Sam."

"We're all sorry for 'im," said mother, whose needles were clicking steadily and almost automatically; "an' I'm sure a lad 'at's left without a mother's to be pitied more nor blamed if 'e goes wrong; for what's a man, I should like to know, to bring a ba'rn up 'at hasn't gumption enough to know which side t' little thing's petticoat fastens. But they're as the Lord made 'em an' it isn't to be expected of 'em. All t' same, it's a big risk for a good lass to take, marrying a man like Sam; an' you surprise me, 'Tilda, when you say Mrs. Middleton 'ud favour it."

"Mrs. Middleton can't approve of Sam," I said, rather hotly. "She's a good woman herself and——"

"You save your breath to cool your porridge, Louis," said 'Tilda calmly. "I 'appen to know 'at Mrs. Middleton *would* like Liz to wed Sam, an' shoo's tell'd her so herself, so there. Shoo thinks he'd begin to come to t' chapil, then, an' 'ud turn over a new leaf. Shoo tell'd her 'at the son of two sich good parents couldn't be a castaway—'at it wor agen Scriptur'—an' 'at Liz could be t' means o' saving his soul fro' death."

"It's all varry well experimentin' wi' other fowk's lasses," Bella broke in furiously, "but shoo'd none be so ready to let one of her own go. Wait while Miss Mary grows up, an' then see."

"And if it didn't turn out well," said Victoria, "I suppose she'd say that Lizzie had made her bed and must lie on it."

"And 'at they shouldn't ha' been unequally yoked together," added Bella bitingly.

"It isn't same as it were just a trial, like," said mother. "It's too late to get t' egg back into t' shell when you've broke it into t' frying-pan. He's got set in 'is ways, 'as Sam, an' I doubt if Liz could shift 'im. What caps me is 'at she's ever given it a thought."

"Well, you see," said 'Tilda, "shoo's known 'im from a lad. They lived neighbours i' them days an' went up to t' school together. Shoo pities 'im; an' they say that's next door to love, don't they?"

Mother laid her knitting on her knee. "It's a sad job," she said, "'at things gets into such a mess; but when t' milk's sour you can't mend it by pouring good cream in. If only the Lord 'ud soften 'is 'eart for 'im it 'ud be a good thing for both 'im an' Lizzie, 'appen."

"What Sam wants is t' bread of affliction an' t' water of affliction," said Bella in a hard voice, and picking up the poker she thrust it savagely between the bars of the grate; making the flames leap towards the chimney.

At that moment an uncertain step was heard on the

pavement outside, the latch of the door was raised and the door pushed partly open. Looking round in surprise, we saw a gaunt old man holding the door with trembling hands. His long white beard could not conceal the convulsive movement of the jaw, which seemed to prevent the formation of words, for nothing came from the open lips. The face was haggard, and from the eyes terror and appeal looked mutely forth. His hands and legs trembled as he supported himself against the door.

"It's Abe," exclaimed Bella, who jumped up and lit the lamp, whilst 'Tilda went up to the old man. "What is it, Abe lad?" she asked. "Are ye badly?"

Still he did not speak, but shook more violently than ever.

"'Ave ye such a thing as a drop o' brandy, Bella?" said mother. "It's spasms or summat o' t' sort."

"I'll nip out for some to t' Wheat Sheaf," said 'Tilda; but Abe made a gesture of dissent.

"It's Sam!" he stammered; "they've ta'en him."

The truth burst upon us all.

"Ta'en 'im," repeated Bella; "ta'en Sam? Do ye mean t' police?"

"Aye, handcufted 'im, down at t' 'Orse an' Jockey, an' ta'en him up for stealin' waste. Oh, whativer mun I do? My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

CHAPTER XVIII

SAM LIGHTFOOT'S DOWNFALL

THE news of Sam's arrest came as a great shock to me, not only because I had failed to realise the seriousness of his offence, but even more because I had not believed that Mr. Middleton would carry out his threat and send Sam to prison without warning. I knew that measures were being taken for turning suspicion into certainty, but I was not asked to co-operate, and I had been particularly careful to make no inquiries on my own account. Mr. Middleton had pledged me to secrecy in Seth's cottage, and no word relating to the matter had ever passed my lips. I might almost say that I had ceased to think about it, for I had heard so many stories of Sam's misdeeds and the fate that awaited him that I no longer paid much heed to them.

It was a serious business this time, however, for his thefts had been continuous and systematic.

In both the processes of spinning and weaving there is always a certain amount of waste. Occasionally the yarn breaks and " snarls " when it is being spun, just as it may break whilst it is being woven ; and the " waste " thus formed is placed by the spinner or weaver in " pockets " kept for the purpose, and is usually collected daily. Then again there is a kind of waste called " laps," which may be made in any of the processes through which the wool has to pass in the spinning department. These " laps " are much more valuable than the other kind of waste, because they

can be re-combed and made into a rather lower class of yarn. There is still a third kind, consisting of "sweepings," which is of comparatively little value.

It was part of Sam Lightfoot's duty as warehouseman to store the waste in separate bins and overlook the packing of it in readiness for the waste-dealer. He had to see that the different qualities were kept separate; that the bags, or "sheets" containing them were carefully weighed; that the entries in the delivery book were accurately described and corresponded with the counterfoil, so that the invoice could be made out and the goods paid for before they left the premises.

This precaution of prepayment was necessary in those days, because waste-dealers as a class were regarded with suspicion. There were good and bad, of course, but the business was one that afforded scope for dishonest dealing, and hence the dealers were generally closely watched. They called at the mills with their own carts, and often brought their own "sheets," and packed the waste themselves under the usually keen supervision of the warehouseman.

It will be readily understood that it needed only collusion between the warehouseman and the dealer for a system of petty thefts to be arranged which it would be extremely difficult to discover. "Laps" could be placed at the bottom of the sheet and "sweepings" at the top, and the entire contents entered as "sweepings"; weights could be falsified, and occasionally an entire sheet could be omitted and the amount divided between the two confederates. It was not much, of course, a matter of a few shillings every time, but the sum was not inconsiderable in the course of a twelvemonth.

Sam had held the post so long that neither Mr. Middleton nor Joss had ever doubted his honesty. Joss disliked the man because he was idle and bore a bad character outside; but it had not occurred to him that a man who would steal

pheasants might be expected to turn his thoughts to nearer channels of unlawful income. It was one of Sam's mates who had become suspicious. He noticed that Sam contrived to handle the waste himself, and that he always invented an excuse for sending him from the "waste-hoil" whenever the dealer came round.

The man was not more sharp-witted than the rest, but he began to set little traps for Sam on his own account, so that his suspicions were confirmed, and the rumour went abroad that had filtered through to Seth's ears, and so had come at last to Mr. Middleton.

Impulsive as our master was, he was not the man to take precipitate action in a matter of this kind. He knew the intensity of the feeling against Sam and what scant reliance could be placed upon village gossip. All the same, something had to be done, and that without loss of time. He took no one but Joss into his confidence, but from that moment the coil tightened about the unconscious man and escape was hopeless.

Joss told me later that he haunted the "waste-hoil" night after night; weighed the accumulated waste, and made his own secret entries. He compared them with Sam's books after the waste-dealer's visits and satisfied himself as to the man's guilt. For weeks this was continued, until the systematic nature of the transactions was fully established. Then the blow fell.

On this particular afternoon in April the waste-dealer had called at the Upper Mill; had made his purchase and paid for it; and was on his way back to Broadbeck when a stranger who had been walking along the highway in front of him begged the favour of a lift.

If the dealer had been an observant man he might have noticed that this stranger had been loitering behind the hedge near the Upper Mill whilst the cart was being loaded; though he would not have seen him leave his hiding-place

and stride swiftly along the shorter field path as soon as the cart had got well round the bend in the lane on its return journey.

Suspecting nothing, the dealer nodded consent, and together they rode into the town. "Where'll I drop you?" he asked, as they neared the centre.

"I'll get off at your warehouse," the man replied.

Mr. Middleton was waiting at the warehouse door, and at the sight of him the dealer started.

"It's all right, my man," said the stranger; "he won't hurt you. We'll have these bags off the cart now and get them on your scales. Pass out your receipted invoices and delivery note. I'm a detective, West Riding police."

The dealer opened the door, protesting his innocence; but he knew the game was up. Nine "sheets" had been invoiced; there were ten on the cart. Not one of them was less than fourteen pounds above the weight invoiced, whilst several of the sheets described as "sweepings" contained a considerable quantity of "laps." The invoices were checked by Mr. Middleton and the detective in the presence of the dealer and his man, and the crestfallen wrongdoer was then marched off to the charge-office. A couple of hours later Sam Lightfoot was arrested on warrant at the Horse and Jockey and lodged in an adjoining cell.

Mr. Middleton waited in the police station until Sam had been brought in between two constables; addressed a few words to him, which were received in surly silence, and then took train to Bexleigh. He had had nothing to eat since noon and it was now nearly nine o'clock. There was no cab at the station, so he set off to walk, and he covered the distance to Brier Dene in little more than twenty minutes and went straight to Abe's cottage. We had got the old man to bed, and I was sitting by his side trying to persuade him to eat the supper that Bella had prepared when I heard

Mr. Middleton's voice below, and then his quick foot on the stone stairs.

I rose at once, but he bade me remain, and I went over and stood by the mantelpiece, wondering why I was not sent away. I think I know the reason to-day. Mr. Middleton never lost the opportunity of "improving" an occasion, and it would please him to be able to justify himself and establish the integrity of his action before an impartial witness. He was always indifferent to the world's judgment, but very anxious that the world should not be indifferent to his.

Abe was propped up with pillows and Mr. Middleton went straight up to the bed and seated himself in the chair that I had vacated. His face was white, but his voice was tender.

"Abe, old friend," he said, "you served my father and me faithfully for five and thirty years. I don't forget it, and I'm as sorry for him as if he were my own lad, but I'm more sorry for you."

The old man had his eyes fixed upon the speaker's face, but the dazed expression never left them, and he did nothing but moan.

"This is a great shock to you," continued Mr. Middleton, "but you'll get over the worst in a day or two, and I've come on purpose to try to make it easier for you. Now pull yourself together and listen to me."

There was a note of masterfulness in the concluding words, and the old habit of obedience was still strong in Abe. The moaning ceased, but the breath came heavily with the rise and fall of the chest.

"You know what Sam has been doing, don't you?"

Abe groaned. He had never lowered or removed his eyes, and Mr. Middleton did not avoid them.

"Abe, I was forced to have him locked up, and his accomplice with him. It must have been going on for years. You would have done the same in my place."

Abe's lips were sealed, and Mr. Middleton began to fidget a little under the steady gaze. He tried again:

"Gold gets purified in the furnace, Abe, and Sam will come out, I trust, a better man."

Then at length the old man spoke, in a voice so hard and yet so hollow that I did not know it, but his eyes were fixed like those of a statue.

"Aye, an' clay gets 'ardened. My poor Sam's allus been clay. 'E goes in a bad 'un; what if 'e comes out a devil?"

Mr. Middleton did not flinch. The old man's silence had disconcerted him, and he spoke more easily now, and with a new note of defiance, though not unsympathetically.

"Would you have had me let him off, Abe? Tell me. Don't forget that nearly everybody knew but Joss and me. It would have been wrong to let him off, wouldn't it?"

The old man breathed heavily, but was silent.

"Well, now, Abe," continued Mr. Middleton, who appeared to think that silence meant consent, "I want you to understand that I'm not going to be hard on Sam. I've no doubt the other rascal's the worse of the two, and I shall not press the case: I've even gone so far as to instruct a lawyer to defend him. But his guilt is as clear as daylight and he'll have to go to prison, that's certain. I'm sorry this blow has come to you through me, but Sam has been walking for years in slippery places, and he was bound to fall some time—the wonder is he hasn't been caught long ago. I'll do my best to help him to his feet again, but he's sinned and he's got to be punished."

Abe heaved a deep sigh. "Aye, he's got to be punished, reyt enough, an' 'is old father wi' 'im. 'Though 'and join in 'and, the wicked shall not be unpunished; but the seed o' the righteous shall be delivered.' Oh, my God, what 'ave I done?"

The voice ended in a wail, and Mr. Middleton, much moved by the quotation and the tone in which it was given,

rose to his feet but immediately sat down again, and said:

"You must be reasonable about it, Abe. There's nothing to be gained by punishing yourself. I promise you I'll do as much for Sam as if he were my own lad. I'll pay you his wages while he's in, and keep his job open for him. I'll meet him when he comes out, and between us we'll make a man of him, with God's help. I couldn't do more if he were my own son; now could I?"

The old man had been looking into space, but at this appeal he again fixed his eyes stonily upon Mr. Middleton.

"Would you 'ave sent your own lad to gaol?" he asked.

Mr. Middleton reflected a moment. He was too honest to prevaricate. Then he jerked up his head.

"Under the same circumstances, yes, I would," he said.

Abe did not speak for a moment or two, and when he did his voice was very low. "Aye, an' I believe you would, Mr. David, an' so would your father if it 'ad ha' been you. It must be reyt enough, an' still—someway, I could ha' liked you to ha' gi'en 'im just one more chance—a sort of a warnin', like. You never 'ave warned 'im, 'ave you? 'Unto seventy times seven' it says in t' Book; an' in another place 'E frankly forgave 'em both'; but it's not for his father to say 'at you're wrong, Mr. David."

"Abe," said Mr. Middleton, taking the old man's unresisting hand in his, and speaking with some emotion, "I do forgive him, and God is my witness I don't cherish any grudge against him; but it's the law he's broken and the law will punish him."

The old man moved himself wearily. "But you set it agate," he said; "'owever, I dar'say I should ha' thowt nowt about it if it 'ad been onybody else's lad. It's same as it makes a difference when it's your own. But you say it doesn't, an' my 'ead's in sich a whirl 'at I can't follow it all out. There's summat about mercy as well as justice, if

I could call it to mind; but it's ower late now, onyway; we shall hev it to bide."

Mr. Middleton's eyes were moist, like my own.

"I am showing him mercy, Abe," he said. "Can I do more than I am doing?"

Abe shook his head. "'Appen not; but if only the Lord could ha' found some other way——"

He broke off and fixed his eyes on the clothes, and Mr. Middleton rose as if to leave. Then the old man spoke again:

"Mr. David, sit down a minute, will you?"

Mr. Middleton sat down but did not speak, and Abe appeared to collect himself.

"You won't remember it, but 'is mother died when 'e wor a very little lad, an' I wor too throng wi' D. an' D. Middletons' business i' t' daytime, an' wi' meetin's o' one sort an' another at night, to bother much wi' 'im, an' t' lad had to fend for 'isself. I've thowt sometimes this last year or two, an' it comes ovver me now, 'at the Lord 'ud happen ha' been better pleased if I'd spent less time at t' chapel prayin' for other fowk, an' bothered more wi' my own ba'rn."

He paused for breath, which came with difficulty, and Mr. Middleton found no words in reply.

"There's one thing I must say to you, Mr. David, an' I want yon lad o' Rachel Turner's to 'ear it. I 'eld yon job 'at Sam's had for nigh on one an' twenty year, an' every scrap o' waste passed through my 'ands, an' I call God to witness 'at I never took as much as a penn'orth."

His voice trembled piteously and he raised one hand in the air as he spoke.

"I know it, old friend," said Mr. Middleton, whose eyes were now wet. "You needn't tell me."

"I'm glad o' that," said the old man slowly. "All 'at I 'ave I got 'onest; an' there's a matter o' two 'undered

pound put by i' my name. If you can reckon up what Sam's ta'en I could like to pay it back if it'll go as far——"

"Not a penny," interrupted Mr. Middleton in a broken voice. "I won't have it from you, Abe. I'll do my best for Sam, and please God you'll live to be proud of him yet. But I won't have a penny piece of your savings——"

Abe put his hand on the other's arm, and there was dignity in his voice as he said:

"Sam's my lad. It's my right to pay that money, Mr. David, an' pay it I must. For Sam's own sake——"

He stopped, and his head fell back upon the pillows, for he had fainted. We summoned the women and I sped to Norrside for a doctor. Morning was breaking over the hills before Mr. Middleton left the cottage and set off to walk home. He had more than four miles to cover and he walked wearily, stooping a little; and my heart ached for him, but not as it had ached for the older man whose worn-out frame was still enough now in the chamber above.

CHAPTER XIX

DIAMOND OR PASTE ?

WE laid the old man to rest in the bleak graveyard at Norrside, and there was not a mourner there who grieved more sincerely than David Middleton. He opened his heart to me as we walked down the road together, and I saw how the deeps of my master's soul had been stirred. It was not that he repented his action in the least ; he never doubted that he had done his duty as a master—it was *his* Master's ways that were past finding out ; and the tragedy of Abe's bitter experience and broken heart was one of those mysteries which faith could not attempt to fathom.

" There are lots of things in God's dealings with man, Louis," he remarked, " that are obscure " ; and, boy that I was, the thought crossed my mind that there are more things that are obscure in man's attributions to God.

It was the end of July before Sam came home. Mr. Middleton met him at the gaol gate and brought him back, and we had all assembled in his home to make him welcome.

Mr. Middleton did not remain in the house more than a minute or two, and Sam accompanied him to the door with an outward show of respect. Then, as his master turned the corner, he swore beneath his breath and said, with no attempt at concealment, " All right, David Middleton, it's been your turn, but mine'll come. Not this year, 'appen, or next, but come it shall, by God ! "

His looks did not encourage us to stop with him, and we heard the door bolted behind us as we left. But late that

night he stole out of the house and made his way to his father's grave at Norrside, and there are those who declare that he sat there until dawn, nursing thoughts, I fear, that were blacker than the night.

The village knew no other excitement until the new mill was opened early in the following year, and that soon died down when it was found that Mr. Middleton's weavers remained loyal, and that Marsden would have to rely on assistance from the neighbouring villages. The inconvenience of this led to the erection of row after row of cottages, and a considerable extension of the village on the high ground in the neighbourhood of the factory.

Mr. Middleton professed indifference, and indeed I believe he was quite unconcerned. He greeted his competitor pleasantly enough when they met; but as time went on and the lessening demand for plain goods became more appreciable he chafed at the sight of Marsden's heavily-laden drays when the greater number of his own looms were weaving for stock.

"It won't last, Joss," he said one day in the second year of this competition; "it can't. Seth pulls a long face, and Louis is getting to be as bad, but our turn will come. It's sure to. I don't doubt that for a minute."

"I don't care how soon," replied Joss, "but there's no sign of it yet, seemin'ly. If it wasn't for these orders o' Blunts', things 'ud be looking sicklier nor I've known 'em."

Mr. Middleton shrugged his shoulders. "No difficulty about keeping our weavers, is there, Joss? He doesn't entice them from us?"

"What should they leave for? Your brass is as good as his: but it 'ud soon be another tale if we came to 'ave some o' t' looms standing."

"I won't stop a single loom," said Mr. Middleton, bringing his hand down on the desk against which he was leaning; "I never have done and I never will."

Joss looked across at me as he replied, "Ye'll be fast where to put t' stuff if it goes on another year like this; but let's hope it won't."

"Of course it won't," said Mr. Middleton cheerily. "What you and Louis want is more faith. They laugh best who laugh last, and David Middleton will have the last laugh, you'll see."

I took advantage of his good humour to remind him that it was Victoria's last day at home and to ask if I might have the afternoon off. He granted the request at once and I told him that we should be on the Ridge if we were wanted.

It was there that I found her ten minutes later, sitting among the bracken, which was already edged with brown and splashed with gold. The gorse bushes were aflame everywhere, and here and there patches of heather spread about their roots, and the purple bells pushed their way through the spikelets and nodded pleasantly in the shadows. Far below, the dusty highroad stretched down to the village, but it was bare of traffic, and only the sound of a roadmender's spade, as he slowly scraped the surface, reached the ear. In the rich level pastures beyond cattle were feeding at their ease, for a cool wind was blowing and the flies had taken holiday. Purple gleamed in the haze beyond the slumbering village, and the far-away hills were mantled in blue that deepened to violet.

Victoria's eyes were fixed upon the scene, and I wondered for a moment if the beauty of it had seized her now that she was about to leave it behind; but I soon saw that it was not so. My heart throbbed as I looked upon her. She was my only companion still, and the pain of parting was so intense as to suggest physical suffering.

She looked up as she heard my step behind her and smiled a welcome. Very strong and healthy, very sensible and self-possessed she was. Most people, I suppose, would have called her plain-featured, but her face was attractive none the less, and digging for treasure had ennobled it and

brought another expression to the eyes and brow. Her hat was away down the hillside in the safe keeping of a gorse bush which had rescued it from the breeze; and her dark hair, neatly coiled behind, was blowing all about her eyes.

"Come along and sit down," she called, and as I seated myself at her side she said, "Do you know what I was thinking about as you came up? Nicholson's Court! Can it possibly be true, Louis, that this is only our fourth autumn here? I feel as if I had lived here for ages."

"So do I," I replied, "and as if Nicholson's Court were a dream."

Victoria laughed. "It was a dream that lasted a long time with me, but I had some good times there. Do you ever think of poor old Sandy Mac and the rest of them? Fancy! only four years ago that I fought the kid, and now I am eighteen and going to college."

"Yes," I said, "you were no end of an Amazon in those days, Vic, and I believe you could hold your own yet."

She glanced humorously at her arms. "I'm sure I could,' she said. "I'm 'no waster,' as 'Tilda would say. I've a muscle like whipcord yet, though there are no Sandys and Blusters to practise on."

"You remember what followed the great fight, Vic?"

"Rather!" She pressed my hand affectionately. "Only four years ago! 'Which is absurd,' as Euclid would say; it seems more like twenty-four."

All the time there was a note of triumph in her voice and I knew that she was happy, and I was not at that moment unselfish enough to rejoice with her. It was not that I envied her good fortune, but I was in love with her and I coveted an expression of her love. I wanted the sense of the loss she was going to sustain to cloud for to-day the brilliant prospect of all to-morrows. I do not suppose I am the only young man who has thought himself colossal enough to hide the sun—and indeed it is easily done when two people are very close to each other; but I did not bulk large enough in

Victoria's eyes just then. If only she had become sentimental I should, of course, have set to work to comfort her and to prove how unnecessary and indeed foolish it was to fret about the parting. When she did not become sentimental and showed no sign of fretting I felt a sense of injury.

Yet she had squeezed my hand and I knew that she loved me, so I said:

"You will get on by leaps and bounds, Vic, as you have done, but you will always be the same to me. I loved you from the very first hour, for you were a real jewel in Nicholson's Court, but I wouldn't have believed that you would take polish like this; I couldn't."

The girl's eyes clouded for the first time.

"Very common stuff takes polish, Louis, and I'm not a jewel and never shall be. I could cry sometimes when it comes over me, and I know I'm 'silly,' as I used to say; but during these summer months in Airlee I have come to see quite clearly that I shall never be—how shall I put it?—the real thing, you know."

It ended with a sigh that was real enough, and I replied, banteringly:

"What in the world do you want? You must have more worlds to conquer? Well, you are going to college. You will take your degree. God alone knows what success you will achieve. It is I, poor beggar, who should sigh, for who is to encourage me when you are gone?"

She again squeezed my hand, but a strained look was in her eyes and they were not fixed on mine.

"I have wanted to say this, Louis, but I haven't known how, and it sounds childish when put into words. It was your mention of 'jewel' that set me off. You don't know how grateful I am to Mr. Truman and Mr. Middleton for all they have done and are willing to do, and to you, too, old boy, who set me going; but sometimes—sometimes I wish, or half wish, I'd never started."

"But why?" I interposed; "and what has the 'jewel' got to do with it?"

"Just this," she replied. "You can cut and polish glass as you like, but you can't make it into a diamond whatever you do. I'm sure I shall get on—I won't be a reproach to Mr. Truman—but I've my father and mother in me and I shall never be more than cut-glass, and—well, it makes all the difference."

I had never suspected this, and I was troubled.

"You are good enough for me," I said lamely; "and anyhow you had better be a crystal at its best than a diamond without lustre."

"I'm not good enough for you, Louis," she said, and her sadness went to my heart. "I want to be, but I don't think I ever shall. I'm crystal, and I want to be diamond I cry for the moon, like a fool. I see other girls, not half so clever as myself, and they've got something I shall never get. Mr. Truman thinks London may turn paste into diamond, but I know it won't. All the same, I shall do my best, and it's an interesting experiment."

"What is?" Mr. Middleton had approached unnoticed by either of us.

We rose to our feet, and the question was not answered. How I admired Victoria's self-possession as she said:

"I am going to-morrow, Mr. Middleton. Thank you so much for all you are doing for me. I don't know why you are so good to me, but I shall be grateful all my life, and especially when I think of what I might have been but for you. Do you remember our first meeting, sir?"

"Well enough," he replied, and his eyes glistened. "I came round on purpose to say good-bye on my way home. Will you walk with me some of the way?"

We turned at once, and for a time nothing was said. Then Mr. Middleton spoke abruptly:

"You'll be setting to work to get your house ready, Louis,

when Victoria leaves you. Don't be rash; you know London holds a lot of eligible young fellows. There may be competition in husbands as well as in manufacturers. However, if you go to Marsden you'll be able to start housekeeping in quite a big way."

I smiled. "I suppose Joss has told you that I declined the offer. I should have mentioned it to you to-morrow."

"It's every man for himself in these days, you know," said Mr. Middleton drily.

"I'm for you as well as myself," I replied; "that is, if you're satisfied."

I knew he was, but my reply had pleased him.

"That's all right, Louis. Now look here: I allow no one to outdistance me. I'm not going to bid against Marsden or anyone else for your services. All the same, you won't suffer for refusing him. I rely on you and you can rely on me. Now don't come any farther."

He stopped and held out his hand to Victoria. "Goodbye, Vic. I've left a Bible for you at your mother's. Read it; and don't forget that there are more kinds of wisdom than one. You'll see what I've written in the front of the book. And, by the way, if you need more money you know where you can get it."

We walked slowly back through the woodland, where the surface of great grey rocks formed a level pathway, and the bracken was swept by the low, far-extending branches of dwarfed and sturdy oaks, and we spoke of Mr. Middleton and his generosity.

"I worry about him sometimes," I said; "he's so hard to move, and blind to his own interests."

"You'll be faithful to him, Louis?" said Victoria. It was not really a question, though.

"God helping me, I will," I said; "and he will be faithful to me, as you and I will be to each other."

Victoria did not speak, and I grew uneasy. "It is an

understanding, Vic dear, this marriage of ours—some time, when you have covered yourself with honours?"

Her arm tightened on mine. "I do not know," she said. "There's a barrier between us—I feel it but can't explain it. Don't interrupt me, Louis, for it's hard enough for me to speak and you mustn't make it harder. I am not your sort. I try to imitate you and I can't. I try to make myself your sort and I can't. Learning can't do it, for I know more than you, and it doesn't bridge the gulf. I couldn't make you happy as I am, and I may never be different. There is no understanding, Louis."

"But there is, Vic," I answered hotly. I was greatly distressed. The world seemed slipping away from me. I felt as Dante felt when Beatrice died; and I burst into impassioned pleading.

"God knows I love you and shall always love you," she said simply when I ended. I had exhausted every argument: I had pointed to my origin, to my mother's rough speech, to my material prospects—all in vain. "And I know you will always love me," she continued, "and nothing will ever make me doubt your love. Dear old boy"—she stopped and kissed my forehead, not even glancing round to see if she were observed—"I love you too well to marry you unless I know that I can make you happy for ever and ever. If London gives me the mysterious 'something' that you've got—well then, perhaps——"

"It will give you it," I said hotly; "or you will forget this nonsense about gulfs."

"Very well," she said, smiling. "We will wait and see, won't we? Now let us get my hat."

I had forgotten the hat, and Mr. Middleton had evidently not noticed that she was without. We recovered it easily enough and then went home; and neither of us found it easy to speak, for our hearts were full.

CHAPTER XX

THREE YEARS LATER

VICTORIA'S departure marked the close of a well-defined era in my history, and in the three years that followed there is no event that stands out prominently in my memory, though during that time forces were gathering that were to have a tragic effect on the lives of most of those who have figured in my chronicle. I hardly know when I became conscious of them, for they came gradually and silently like the snow that falls upon the mountain-tops, and three full years must have passed before I began to realise that there might be an avalanche.

They were very happy years—I am surprised to find how happy and with what zest I recall them. There may be something in the enchantment that distance lends, or it may be positive obliquity of judgment on my part, but I am disposed to think that they were the most fruitful of all my early years; yet the memories I conjure up would seem to most people trivial and meaningless.

Brier Dene was my college, and the humble folk who lived there did not suspect that they were the professors and tutors who were educating me and fitting me for service in another sphere; and I was just as unconscious. I see it all now, and it interests me to trace out some of the influences that opened up my mind and set my imagination to work. I had no companion, but the villagers were a sociable people and I interested myself in their interests. Some of the scenes come back to me as I write. There was the shop

where Lizzie Nelson's mother (such a dot of a woman, yet plump and solid as one of her own sacks of flour) dispensed the varied contents of her crowded store. It was a tiny place, and so low that I was always hitting my head against the hams and pans and whitewash brushes that hung down from the wooden ceiling, to the dismay of Lizzie and her mother but the vast delight of their customers. It was a rare spot for the study of human nature, because everybody came to it for supplies. Here, in addition to such necessaries as tallow candles and woollen comforters, greens and groceries, you could obtain the famous Cure-all in shilling bottles that accounted for the infrequency of the doctor's visits; and here you could—and did—receive admonitions on wasteful expenditure and the sin of thriftlessness for which no charge was made, and which did not tend to fill Mother Nelson's money-box. I have spent hours in the shop and the little room behind, helping Lizzie to straighten out the tangled accounts in what Mrs. Nelson proudly called her ledger.

Memories of a rougher kind, but still pleasurable, group themselves about the shop at the corner where the youths of the village regaled themselves with hot pies each week-end and flung feeble and age-worn jokes across the room for the benefit of the old pie-man, who never appeared to hear them.

"However far off did ta stand, Silas, when tha chucked t' meat in? Tha must ha' been i' t' doorhoil, lad, wi' a strong wind blowing." I hear it now, and the laughter that always accompanied it; and I smile as I smiled then.

All sorts foregathered there, and I got into the habit of joining them because I was at first lonely and restless and afterwards because I found it to be a gathering-ground of incident and experience quaintly and even coarsely expressed, from which I collected thoughts that furnished my mind and greatly enriched it. During these peaceful years I began to see visions of a new world where the

spinning and manufacturing of webs of life might rival in interest the mechanical processes in Mr. Middleton's mills.

Mr. Truman remained my friend but adhered to his resolution to let me go my own way, and I never came near to filling Victoria's place. Every success the girl gained threw him into a state of excitement and kindled a light in his eye that did not soon die down; and when she came over during vacation he was eager for her company and put her through an examination that would have exhausted most people's patience. Such visits were all too short for me, because Victoria managed to pick up work in London which paid her expenses and kept her, as she expressed it, "near the heart of things." When she did happen to be at home for more than a week or so she went back to the mill and took her place at the loom as she had done formerly, and did it without affectation; but she looked for the beginning of a new term as sick folk look for the morning.

Mother and I came closer to each other, too, in those years, and I did my best, consciously and of set purpose, to make her feel that there need be no constraint between us; yet I knew, and it hurt me to know it, that I was a stranger in my mother's home; and every upward step I took brought pain as well as pride to the one who loved me more than any other, and who, as I was to learn later, nursed a great fear at her heart. I realised something of it at the time, but I know now how heavy the burden was that she carried and how bravely she struggled to conceal it from me.

I did indeed make rapid progress in many ways during those years, and not least in my mastery of the business and in the favour of my employer. I became known in the mills as the "young gaffer" and really occupied that position, though it had never been formally assigned to me; and I was on good terms with Joss and all the "hands." I was almost equally fortunate at the Broadbeck end, though Tom Greening gave only a grudging assent to the arrangement

by which he had to take instructions from "a lad," and I always felt that I might some day stir up the slumbering volcano. I had the good will, too, of our customers, to all of whom I became well known, as I called upon them regularly; and I saw with growing clearness the factors that made for Mr. Middleton's success and failure. The blunt business men of Yorkshire and Lancashire are not the sort to conceal their opinion of a man's employer or to choose smooth words for the expression of them.

My reports were frequently given in the drawing-room at "The Hollies," for I often returned to the warehouse after Mr. Middleton had left, and he was always impatient of delay; always, too, on the watch for that turn in the tide that should carry "fancies" into oblivion and bring in a flood of orders for the plain goods that were accumulating in his warehouse by thousands. The Middletons dined in the middle of the day in the old-fashioned provincial way, and had a substantial tea at half-past six. I often joined them at the evening meal, and was received, so far as my employer was concerned, on a footing of absolute equality; but Mrs. Middleton was never more than well-disposed, and her rather stately manner and too-sweet smile disconcerted me at first. She became ill and irritable towards the end of the period and had a certain asperity of manner that reacted on her husband and made things uncomfortable all round.

I saw comparatively little of Mary Everard at first, for before Victoria went to London she had been sent to what was called in those days a "finishing school" at Spa, and was at home only in the holidays; but later on she was almost always present and I was never quite at ease in her company.

She was invariably affable, and when she showed me her plants or her paintings it was entirely without patronage; but I still retained my boyish feeling that she belonged to

another world, and I could not help being self-conscious and awkward. Still, I enjoyed the evenings I spent with all three, and as I got to know my master through and through (or so I thought) my regard for him increased, even though I knew him to be a compound of amazing inconsistencies and unaccountable crotchets.

More than three years had gone by when an incident occurred that marked the beginning of a new era. It had been arranged that I should stay the night at "The Hollies," as I was to leave by an early train for Manchester on the morrow.

Mr. Middleton was beginning to be anxious about business —and there was good cause for it—and we were in the midst of an earnest conversation in the dining-room when Alderman Blunt was announced. The alderman was the only man amongst our customers who showed me no cordiality, and if he disliked me, as I daresay he did, I certainly wasted no love upon him.

I glanced inquiringly at Mr. Middleton, but he motioned me to sit still, and Mr. Blunt took the easy-chair that was assigned him and put his feet upon the fender with an air of appreciative comfort.

He was undeniably a fine-looking man; erect still, firm of flesh and not much wrinkled in spite of his eighty-one years. The same hard note was in his voice; the same pompous manner distinguished him. He was a little stouter and his hair was very white now; otherwise there was no great alteration from the Baldwin Blunt I had first met six years before.

He glanced round the room and said with what I chose to consider offensive condescension:

"It's not a bad little room, this, David, but I wonder your father did not provide a library when he built the house. Still, this is cosy."

Nothing could have been cosier. Heavy curtains were

drawn across the window; the fire blazed cheerfully in the grate, and a pink glow from the silk-shaded lamp gave warmth to the silver on the sideboard and the oil paintings on the wall, as well as to the grey heads of the two men who faced each other on the hearth.

Mr. Middleton was not very gracious. "My father kept most of his books in his safe," he said; "and his library was his office. What books he bought for home reading didn't need a room to themselves."

Mr. Blunt nodded. "That is true, David, perfectly true. Your father was a man of one Book, but it was *the* Book: the Book of Books. 'Diligent in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord'—that sums up your father admirably."

Mr. Middleton's chin was at danger point, and his lips remained closed.

"If he had smoked, David," the alderman continued pleasantly, "it would have been different. He might have had a combination of smoke-room and library; but a library is a useful place in which to transact business, and it has, perhaps, an air of greater privacy."

"We're private enough here," returned my master, with more harshness of tone than his neighbour's remark seemed to warrant, "and Louis is safe enough, if you're thinking of him." Deference had given place to defiance, and as I looked at Mr. Middleton's face I noted the care lines on his forehead and the frown on his brow, and saw for the first time that his cheeks were pale and somewhat hollow, and that there was a sinking at the temples that accentuated the expression of anxiety. He had still an abundance of steel-grey hair, though his beard was getting thin; yet, coupling one fact with another, I became aware that my master, strong-willed as he was, was beginning to feel the weight of his burden.

"My father was like his son in one respect" he continued sourly. "He had more sense than to put money

into a pipe and set a match to it. It didn't afford him any pleasure to sit in a chair and watch his profits curl up to the ceiling in smoke."

Mr. Blunt's eyes were half-closed and his hands were folded over the lower part of his waistcoat. He disregarded the challenge and replied blandly:

"'The substance of a diligent man is precious,' David. That is the word of the wise king, and your father knew its truth."

I saw the sudden jerk of the head and knew that Mr. Middleton was letting himself go.

"Yes," he replied, "I'm not quite sure that my father would have parted with his substance as you have persuaded me to part with mine. I'm going to be frank with you, Mr. Blunt. Louis and I were talking about it when you came in, and I say to you, as I said to him, I'm uneasy about these long-date bill transactions, and your new proposals are going to make matters ten times worse."

"I am sorry to hear you say so, David, very sorry. Your father trusted me. I think I may say without exaggeration that he certainly did trust me. And the ground of his confidence was that he knew me. I should have liked to think that his son—but I will not pursue that thought."

Mr. Blunt spoke reproachfully, and the expression on his face was plainly intended to convey the impression that he was deeply pained, but striving hard to be patient and submissive. He opened his eyes a very little to see what effect his words and attitude were having.

Mr. Middleton was not looking at him, and his voice lost none of its hardness:

"My father didn't know what worry meant. In his day you did a home-trade business, and you paid every month as regularly as the pay-day came round."

"Your father cast his care upon the Lord, David."

"And you cast yours upon me," retorted my master

warmly. "I wonder what my father would have said if you had gone to him as you have come to me, and told him that you were unable to meet the bills which fell due the next day, and asked him to accept payment with other bills drawn upon firms abroad whom he knew nothing about. I fancy my father would have jibbed, and I tell you straight I don't like it."

The alderman sighed and spoke with exaggerated patience. It is unlikely that he had ever been inside a theatre, but he was a superb actor:

"The worst of you, David, is that you have no enterprise, no prevision. I explained to you quite clearly when I began this export business three or four years ago that it would require a good deal of capital, and that there might be little delays in payment occasionally. I offered you, if you remember—I think I am stating the facts correctly—a share in the new venture. I was willing to make you, in effect, a sleeping partner; but you declined. I am right, I believe, when I state that your own remark was that you were 'no speculator.'"

He again opened his eyes a little more widely and glanced inquiringly at the moody man opposite.

"Well?" replied Mr. Middleton.

"You were good enough to express your willingness, however," continued the alderman smoothly, "to assist me in any legitimate way, and you accepted large contracts from me on terms of deferred payment. I trust this recapitulation of mine is correct—if not, I hope you will put me right; but I think it is correct, and our young friend will take note of it. Very well. Since that time you have sold me thousands of pieces—many thousands—and I have paid you for them. I charge my memory but I do not remember that I have failed to pay you in any one instance—I think not."

I could see that my master's patience was being sorely

tried, but out of respect for his friend he sought to restrain himself. He could not, however, refrain from interrupting him.

"Why waste all these words, Mr. Blunt? I haven't disputed all this. But put yourself in my place. My father prided himself on always maintaining a balance at his bankers. I don't believe even you would have induced him to seek an overdraft; and I've inherited his disposition. But I've had to do it. I don't distrust you; you were my father's friend and you are mine, and I have always known you to be an honourable and God-fearing man. But look where you are placing me! First of all you give me three-months' bills; then six-months'; and all the time your orders are crowding in on me. I've got to pay my hands every week, and my accounts every month. I'm bound to rely on these bills being met when they are due; and now you come to me at the very last moment and ask me to accept others drawn upon these houses in Australia, South Africa, and the Lord knows where."

"Sh! sh! David," interrupted the other, in a shocked tone of voice; "you are getting hot. Do not use that Name lightly. I am listening to you quite sympathetically, but —if you please, David." He extended one open hand in mild disapproval.

Mr. Middleton bit his lip. "It doesn't alter facts, anyhow," he said. "When I send these bills in I'll bet my bankers kick. I've confidence enough in you, but my bank manager has intimated as plainly as is wise of him that in his opinion I am treading on dangerous ground, and——"

"Stop a minute, David, if you please. Just one moment before we proceed further." The alderman paused for a few seconds, until he had got rid of something that seemed to be choking him. "Am I to understand that they doubt the solvency of Blunt, Sharpe & Co.? Does your bank manager know Baldwin Blunt? I had flattered myself—

I fear I have been too simple—but I really had flattered myself that my character was not unknown to my fellow-townsmen. I have lived among them for eighty-two years, and if I am as keenly interested in business as ever I was, I trust I have not lost my probity—I hope I have not."

"Of course he knows you," replied Mr. Middleton with returning impatience; "but, frankly, he suggests—and he is not by himself, I assure you—that you are going to get your fingers badly burned if you are not careful; and he wants me to be out of it. These bank chaps may be suspicious, but they often know more than they are at liberty to tell."

Mr. Blunt closed his eyes altogether, perhaps to conceal the look of apprehension which this plain statement was calculated to produce; but he was master of his features, and whatever there may have been of inward commotion was not reflected upon the surface.

"I am sorry to have to trouble you, David," he said. "It pains me; and it especially pains me, not so much that your bankers but that the son of my old friend should be influenced by the spiteful tittle-tattle of envious competitors." He carried two fingers to his eye and moved them slowly across his cheek as if to wipe away an involuntary tear before he continued in a low voice, "But we are told to expect it—I ought not to be surprised—I will try to be patient and even cheerful. 'In the world ye shall have tribulation'; I think that is the word—tribulation."

The alderman knew his man. That was why he had called upon him in his home instead of at the office. He would not have hesitated, of course, to use these weapons anywhere; but none knew better than he that at some times and in some places they seemed to lose their edge, whilst under other circumstances they could be employed with

great effect. Here in the dining-room of "The Hollies," still permeated with the religion and spirit of the elder David, his sword became keen and two-edged.

"God knows that I am beginning to understand the meaning of the word," said my master gloomily.

"'Many are the afflictions of the righteous,' David, but we are promised deliverance, you know—we are promised deliverance."

"Are we?" said Mr. Middleton. "But some of the best men haven't found it down here. You can say what you like, Mr. Blunt, but we don't always get deliverance; and things are beginning to worry me. It isn't just your affairs. I've twenty thousand pieces eating their heads off in interest in the warehouse, and I can't sell 'em—at any rate I can't get my price for them, and they stop there until I do. I can't sleep, what with one thing and another; and Ruth is failing."

He sighed heavily and bent his head over his knees.

"I'm sorry for you, David," replied his friend, as he rose; "you are grievously afflicted; but there is one word of cheer I can leave with you. It is the word of Eliphaz the Temanite: 'Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth, therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: for He maketh sore and bindeth up: He woundeth and His hands make whole.' Read the whole passage for yourself, David, and do not let correction destroy your faith in God's Word. I have proved its truth and you may do so: 'thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in in his season.'"

"I don't know about that," said Mr. Middleton as he also rose. "If this sort of thing continues I shall go down to my grave before I am much older. However, send me in the new bills to-morrow and I'll make the best of it."

Mrs. Middleton had gone to bed when we went into the drawing-room, and Mary was quick to notice the worn ex-

pression on her uncle's face. She said nothing for a moment but bent down and stirred the fire into a merry blaze. Mr. Middleton stretched out his hands to it and Mary sat down on the soft white rug, and laying her arms across his knee, looked up into his face.

"Now tell me," she said coaxingly.

"Tell you what, puss?" he answered, whilst the cloud lifted visibly. "There's always worry in business, Moll."

"Does Mr. Blunt worry you?" she persisted.

"He has done," Mr. Middleton admitted; "but you've no need to bother your head about it. He assures me that it is all right."

"And I suppose he supports the assurance with Scripture in the usual way," said Mary; and as her uncle shook his head in reproof she continued, "I'm sorry, uncle, but there's something about the worthy alderman that always stirs the mud up in my feelings, and I can't help it. He's the most remarkable man I ever knew for quoting Scripture, and if he wanted you to get rid of me he'd find a text to prove that you ought to do it."

Mr. Middleton's lips had been framing for a remonstrance, but Mary's closing words sent a twinkle into his eyes and he said with a chuckle:

"That's easily done—I can do it myself. 'No man can serve *two* masters.'" He bent down and stopped her protest with his lips.

CHAPTER XXI

MR. MIDDLETON EXAMINES HIS STOCK

PEOPLE were in the habit of saying that they were too accustomed to David Middleton's eccentricities to be astonished at the report of anything he did; but everybody was surprised when in the spring of the following year he suddenly let "The Hollies," furnished, and took up his abode permanently at Brier Dene. I daresay a variety of causes contributed to this step, but the one that stood in the forefront of his explanations was the state of Mrs. Middleton's health. Looked at from that point of view it was, I am sure, an impulsive and ill-advised decision, for the Mill House stood on low ground, was isolated and gloomy, and on all but the brightest days the surroundings were calculated to depress an invalid who had been accustomed to the fresh breezes of "The Heights," and the frequent visits of friendly neighbours. Still, Mrs. Middleton seemed quite satisfied, and as the arrangement worked well for me I ought not to charge Providence with mismanagement. One thing I had noticed: that my master liked the house and was always most cheerful and reasonable when he was living there. He was king at Brier Dene, with subjects who willingly acknowledged his kingship, and he was thus enabled to exercise a benevolent autocracy that gave him the warm and comfortable feelings of a kindly patriarch. His maids soon found the situation too lonely, and left, but country girls were easily found in those days to take their place, and there was always Marshall to fall back upon.

Marshall was an unmarried man, and he transferred himself and his few belongings to Brier Dene—as he would have transferred them to any part of the globe where his master was removing—with the indifferent remark that one place was as good as another, for aught he knew. Marshall had many of the qualities of an old house-dog. He could snap and snarl on slight provocation, but he was faithful to the master whose house was his home; and I believe he would have given his life for him.

I saw a great deal of the sturdy little coachman now, partly because the victoria was often at my disposal for business purposes, and also because he was a frequent visitor at Seth's cottage. The two were old friends, though they differed greatly in their views on politics and religion and in their outlook on life; and I spent scores of hours in listening to their debates and their frank expressions of opinion on the politics of statesmen and the deeds and misdeeds of all sorts and conditions of men. Mr. Middleton and his affairs were often under discussion, and on those occasions I abstained from taking part, though no disloyal words towards our employer ever passed the lips of either man in my hearing.

There was, however, criticism in plenty, and it extended to the firm's customers.

Mr. Blunt was heartily disliked and distrusted by both.

"Him!" said Marshall, the very first time the alderman's name was mentioned in my presence. "Gimme a bladder an' some oil an' sawdust an' I'll make a better man myself. Bah!"

He had removed his short pipe and now turned down the corners of his mouth with an expression of supreme disgust, and Seth's eyes twinkled humorously.

"You'd 'ave to leave room for some wind, John," he suggested.

Marshall's face was that of a man who has swallowed something unusually bitter.

"He rises my bile whenever I see the old hypocrite," he said.

"John!" said Susan warningly.

"He is one," maintained Marshall. "He'd sell his soul for brass an' wrap it up in a page out o' t' Bible."

"An' a little Bible 'ud be big enough, I reckon," said Seth.

There was a pause and then Seth continued:

"I don't know if I should call him an 'ypocrite exactly. He's one o' them, if I reckon 'im up right, 'at deceive their own selves. I'm sure 'e thinks 'e's a good man."

Marshall's pipe was in use again and he did not trouble to remove it as he said:

"I can do wi' good 'uns, an' I can do wi' bad 'uns if they're genuine, but shoddy Christians makes me want to spit out."

"There's them 'at calls David an 'ypocrite," said Seth, as if to draw his companion.

"There's them as calls good worsted shoddy," replied Marshall, "but it fetches its own price i' t' market." Then with an abrupt change of tone he continued, "How do you think David's looking, Seth?"

Seth glanced at the clock, then turned to Susan. "If I was you, lass," he said, "I'd be getting to bed. Sit ye still while I get t' bottle ready, an' then you can take your time."

The hot-water bottle was a new acquisition and was warming in the oven. Seth removed it and filled it from the kettle on the hob; and it was not until he returned from assisting his wife a quarter-hour later that the conversation was continued.

"He's looking badly, is David," said Seth, when his slippered feet were again on the fender; "but I darsen't say so i' front o' Susan. Dear heart, she'd fret 'er eyes out."

Marshall nodded. "He's ageing fast, if you ask me," he remarked. "Is yon Blunt at t' bottom of it?"

Seth looked at me. He suspected, but he knew that I was better informed than any. I merely smiled.

"He caps me, does David," said Seth, ignoring the direct question. "He's changed this last toathri year. He's same as a man 'at's carrying a load 'at he persuades 'isself isn't there. It bends 'im, but he'll go on cheerful if it breaks 'im."

Marshall looked thoughtfully at me. "Louis says naught," he grunted, "but if all they tell me is right, David won't keep up wi' t' times, an' if he won't there's an end on't. He'll be left i' t' muck at t' finish."

"I 'ope not," said Seth; "but it worries me a bit. I don't know 'at I've said it afore, but I've oft thought lately 'at religion 'ud go down a deal better wi' folks if it were mixed wi' a bit o' gumption. He's got a maggot o' some sort in his 'ead, 'as David, an' if his religion had ha' been stiffened wi' gumption it couldn't ha' thrived. But I can't fairly bottom him this time."

"Nor nob'dy else," said Marshall, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and rose to leave.

I thought of these words when I entered the private office at Broadbeck the next morning. Tom Greening had just been sent for and I followed him in.

"Good-mornin', Mr. David," he was saying. "You're not lookin' partic'lar first-class this mornin'."

"I daresay I'm looking as well as I feel," replied Mr. Middleton, handing me a letter as he spoke. "Who the dickens can be well when there's nothing but worry and bother the day through? Was there anything wrong with that hundred-piece lot we sent to Manchester the other day?"

"Not 'at I know on," said Tom; "we didn't open 'em out, of course, but they seemed reyt enough. Are they grumblin' about 'em?"

"They are sending every blessed piece back. They

won't have them at any price, as they are mildewed, they say, until they are rotten."

The anxious look that spread over Tom's face was reflected, I am sure, in mine. Mr. Middleton was looking at him keenly.

"It'll be a mess if ther's owt in it," said Tom. "We've hed them pieces stacked in t' far corner o' t' ware'us for ten year if we've hed 'em a day. I wor fain an' thankful to see t' pile lowered, but if mildew's getten' intul 'em it'll be the devil."

Three years earlier this observation would not have passed unchallenged, and if it did so now I have no doubt it was because it accorded with Mr. Middleton's own ideas of cause and effect. Many a man who professes to have no personal dealings with the devil has no objection to his employment as a whipping-boy.

"But how on earth can they be mildewed, Tom?" he inquired. "The place is dry enough, surely? If it isn't it ought to have been seen to."

"T' place is as dry as a bone for owt I can see," replied Tom; "but just come up, Mr. David, an' look round for yerself. Every room's rammed an' jammed wi' pieces while there's no gettin' at 'em. I'm fast where to put t' stuff when it's 'livered—reyt fast I am."

We went upstairs and Mr. Middleton looked with his own eyes upon the result of his generosity and stubbornness. He had kept his looms going and his hands employed at a heavy cost. From floor to ceiling the rooms were full of pieces, and the passages between the various stacks were barely wide enough to admit a man. As he went from room to room, taking down a piece here and there and examining it, his gloom deepened.

"There isn't air enough," he said.

"Ther's as much as we can give 'em," replied Tom. "T' walls isn't same as bellowses: ye can't shove 'em

out. When t' room's full it's full, an' ther's an end on't."

The argument was too obvious to be contradicted, and Mr. Middleton said nothing, but took down another piece and turned over its folds.

"Ye'll find nowt wrong there, Mr. David. It'll be when we come to oppen out yond at t' back 'at's been piled up for years 'at we shall 'appen get t' wind knocked out on us. An' it's no easy job gettin' at 'em."

"They'll have to be got at," said Mr. Middleton with decision; "by hook or by crook; so you can make up your mind to it."

"It took us two days to get at yond 'under'd 'at we sent off," commented Tom rather sourly. "Louis would 'ave t' oldest stock sent t' first——"

"I think you had better begin and call him 'Mister' Louis," said Mr. Middleton irritably; and Tom looked up in surprise and then muttered something under his breath.

"What are you growling about now?" shouted his master, with considerable temper. "Am I to be sworn at and looked black at because I give an order? You'd better go down and sit in my chair, Tom Greening, and manage my business. Confound it! men are never satisfied in these days unless they turn master." And he tossed the piece on to the pile and strode towards the door.

Before he reached it, however, he stopped and then turned back. "I'm out of sorts to-day, Tom," he said, as the man did not look round but went on adjusting the cover on the stack of pieces; "what stock have we in the far room?"

"Mr. Turner has t' partic'lars," replied Tom; and Mr. Middleton had the good sense to leave him.

We went back to the private office, and I was told to draw a chair up to the desk.

"Louis," said Mr. Middleton, "I think things get blacker and blacker. I'm worried until I'm ill, and yet I

can't help myself. Blunt's bills were bad enough, but if the stock is spoiling my cup's getting full."

"The blackest night ends," I said as cheerfully as I could; "but in this case, Mr. Middleton, we shall have to give the morning a lift. If I were you I wouldn't take any more orders from Blunts' just now. There are rumours about them, and we ought to be careful."

Mr. Middleton pondered this for a minute and then said:

"Well, rumours or no rumours, we're in and we can't get out. They can't meet the bills, and I can't, so I've got to take these others; and meanwhile their account is growing. I'm certain the bank will protest, but the bank can go to Jericho. If I could only sell off a big lump of stock I shouldn't worry about Blunts'."

"That's what I mean by 'giving the morning a lift'—the light lies in that direction," I said.

"You're too poetical for me, Louis," said my master, though he smiled a little; "but I know your meaning. Find me a customer and I'll sell any minute."

"I can find you a customer," I said pointedly.

"I call a man a customer who is willing to pay my price. Any fool can give his stuff away, but I'm in business to sell mine."

I looked at him steadily. "Do you know how much stock we have?" I asked.

"I told Blunt we must have twenty thousand pieces."

"We have over thirty thousand, and if we don't sell them soon we shall not sell them at all."

"Yes, we shall," he replied sharply; "and we shall sell them at my price. Why, bless your life, man, goods like those are bread and butter on the market—people are bound to have 'em. They've been gorging themselves on these daft fancies for the last year or two and they're gorging themselves yet, but they'll sicken of that diet in a bit, and

then it'll be my turn. It's only a question of how long I can afford to hold, and this confounded business of Blunts' is the very dickens."

For a moment I said nothing, and then, "I must tell you once more I'm afraid you're mistaken, Mr. Middleton, about the sale reviving. You're sending me round now and I feel the pulse of the market. These goods have been bread and butter, I know, but they are so no longer. I've already told you why they've gone out. I wish you would sell them. If you'll only take Hartley's offer we can send five thousand away this week."

Mr. Middleton's chin went up. "I've told you, Louis, I'll accept the price he offered to give twelve months ago. I won't take less, if they rot in the place."

"He won't give it," I replied. "Frankly, I'm sure he can't. The demand gets less and less, and our only chance is to get rid of them whilst there is any demand at all. And just think of the loss of interest on capital in addition."

"I don't forget it," he said sourly. "At the same time I don't agree with you, Louis. You mean well, but you're young and inexperienced, and these chaps get round you. All they want is to get these goods at their own price and then they'll have the laugh at us. But David Middleton wasn't born yesterday."

I was not convinced; but I was a young man, after all, and there were limits to argument. "But what about this mildew?" I ventured.

He became uneasy again. "It may be nothing but a ruse to get a big allowance," he suggested; "but it makes me very anxious."

"Mr. Middleton," I ventured once more, "sell this lot to Hartley and let me find you customers for the rest."

"At my price, Louis," he said, stiffening. "I've come down ten per cent.; I'm hanged if I'll come down another penny."

I changed the subject. "The 'Reliable's' man was at the Upper Mill again yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, was he? Then they've come to their senses?"

"They haven't altered their decision. He looked round the place once more, but he says no insurance company would do better than they offer."

"Then they'll lose it, that's all." He rose and kicked the waste-paper basket into one corner of the room and began to pace to and fro. "They'll find they've caught a Tartar this time, Louis. Now listen to me. If the fellow calls again and wants to discuss the matter send him here. I'll handle it myself. Why, confound it, we've paid the same premium on the two mills for more years than I can count, and if the beggars think I'm going to pay half as much more just because I've put an engine into the Upper Mill they're mistaken. It's robbery, that's what it is. There's no sense or reason in it."

"Well, it isn't as much as that," I said, smiling. "They think the risk is much greater with an engine than with water power, and they are asking——"

"I don't care what they think," he interposed; "it's extortion pure and simple. I've said I won't pay it and I won't. I'm already spending a small fortune on insurance. Look what this place costs me! I've got to cover all this blessed stock, and now the beggars want to double the mill premiums. I'll see them at Jericho first."

I said nothing for a moment, knowing he could not be handled in this mood. Then I asked when the premiums fell due.

"There's a month or two yet," he replied carelessly. "You'll see they'll moderate their tone when the time for renewal actually arrives. When you've lived as long as I have, Louis, you'll know the meaning of bluff. I can see it coming: I can smell it before I see it."

Again I changed the subject. "What about these new designs of mine?" I asked.

Mr. Middleton's mood shifted. He laughed out, and turning his chair to the fire, sat down again.

"You're a very modest fellow, Louis, but you like a word of praise now and then, and won't miss it for want of asking for it."

I daresay I flushed. "You misunderstand me," I said. "I merely want to know if we are to go on with them. I could sell fifty times as many as we can turn out."

"I hate the beastly things," he replied; "but I'm bound to say you have turned out some fine stuff; Blunt's man was saying so yesterday. I'm blest if I know where you get your designs from."

"I'm certain we can secure the fancy trade if you'll consent to launch out," I said emphatically; "but we've got to get rid of this big stock first."

"Well," he said, "go gently, Louis. You think fancies will last, and I don't; but we'll put in a few more jacquards and give you a chance. I suppose that's what you're after?"

I smiled and said, "I hope I shan't be your ruin, Mr. Middleton."

"Do you believe in luck yet, Louis?" he inquired with apparent irrelevance.

Again I smiled and shook my head.

"Lots of fellows would say the luck was against me just now," he continued.

I knew what I would have said if I had dared. I would have told him that stupidity and wilful blindness and pride were the evil influences that were urging him on to disaster, together with a fanatical trustfulness which even his own judgment condemned. But my mouth was closed and I said nothing.

"I've been pretty well off," he went on, "but what if I

should be called upon to lose my money? What if I should have to tread the path of humiliation? What if all my friends should forsake me, and I should go down to the grave stripped of all I have?"

He seemed to take a melancholy pleasure in the thought, and I felt troubled.

"But surely you're not seriously concerned," I said; "or you would sell these pieces and relieve the strain. You're not well, or you wouldn't have these gloomy forebodings. You needn't lose your money; but even if you should I know one who wouldn't forsake you."

Mr. Middleton held out his hand and laughed. "I don't believe you would, Louis. I trust you more than I can explain to myself. I don't say I'm seriously concerned, though this succession of annoyances bothers me and turns my thoughts in that direction. However, ruin is a long way off yet, but if it should ever come I think I could face it; and if anything should happen to me I trust you to look after my wife and Mary."

"Why, of course," I said; "but I don't like to hear you speak in this way. You must pull yourself together, sir."

"All right, Louis," he said, rising. "Heard aught of Vic lately? Haven't you two made up your minds yet when you're going to be married?"

I reddened and shook my head. "It hasn't got as far as that," I said.

CHAPTER XXII

MARY VISITS MY MOTHER

HOWEVER badly things went—and they went very badly during the next few weeks—Mr. Middleton managed to maintain an outward show of cheerfulness; and whilst my own spirits sank as I studied the situation and realised its perils, I marvelled at my employer's attitude and could not determine whether it was faith or wilful blindness that sustained him.

During the early days of May many circumstances combined to depress me, for in addition to the ever-present financial anxiety we were having difficulties at the mills owing to a virulent epidemic of influenza which laid low whole families at a time and made it almost impossible to keep the looms going. Bella and 'Tilda were of the number who succumbed, and before either of them was able to leave her bed, mother, who had been looking after them, broke down too.

I was at my wits' end to know what to do, for there were few professional nurses in those days, and though neighbours were very obliging in times of emergency, the number of those who were able to lend a helping hand was quite inadequate to present requirements. I did my best, but, as mother had observed, I was rather a helpless sort of person in the house, and it was well for us both that Mary Everard became our good angel.

I remember how bright and cold the day was, and how the blood was tingling in my veins as I walked smartly

through the wood on my way home from the Upper Mill. It was Saturday and the middle of May, and the wood was bewitching in its loveliness. There was one far-extending patch of bluebells, so exquisitely delicate in its colouring as the light fell upon it, filtering through the yellow-green foliage of the beech and the darker masses of sycamore and horse-chestnut, that I have never forgotten it, and it has come back to me through the years as a scene out of fairyland. Just at the fork of the path I met Mary, and in answer to her inquiries told her how awkwardly we were fixed.

The question had been perfunctory, but with the answer there came an abrupt change. A look of real concern came into her eyes, and she reflected for a moment with the air of one who was accustomed to make prompt decisions.

"I will come to see her about half-past two," she said.

I protested vehemently, but she brushed all protests aside with a far-away imitation of her uncle's manner. "Aunt Ruth's got it," she explained, "and a nurse is looking after her, so I'm not wanted. And if it has to be it will be," she continued, with that fatalistic philosophy which most of us condemn and yet practise; "for I've been into four sick homes this morning already, and a fifth won't make any difference."

I watched her from behind a screen of bushes as she swung down the path, with grace in her every movement, in every line of her slightly-built figure; and my heart beat quickly at the thought of her visit.

The doctor was just closing the door behind him as I reached home, and he delivered himself of some emphatic observations on the malevolence of a Providence that ran him off his feet and threatened to make him lose his head.

"It's the very devil," he said, and I agreed with him as I had with Tom. "What are you going to do about your mother?" he added in a tone of voice which suggested that I was entirely responsible for all shortcomings. "She ought

to be poulticed and—— Where's that long-legged girl that used to be about ? "

I explained, telling him at the same time that I would do what I could over the week-end, whereupon he heaped instructions and admonitions upon me and turned in next door. "She only wants looking after and she'll do well enough," he called over his shoulder. "Your mother's too tough to be broken up by the flu. Keep her cheerful."

That was more easily said than done, for when mother was ill her outlook was generally as cheery and promising as a blank wall ; but she did not fret for herself, but for the trouble and inconvenience she was causing.

I said nothing about Mary's visit, fearing that it was too good to hope for, and after dinner I hurried up to Mrs. Nelson's for linseed meal. The stock was exhausted, however, so I ran on to Bexleigh, to find on my return that Mary was in possession of the house.

If that seems a strange way of putting it I can only plead that it exactly describes my feelings during the hours of that eventful afternoon. She came tripping down the steps at the sound of my entrance and met me with finger upraised in warning. "Your mother's dozing," she said.

She was the prettiest sight imaginable as she stood for a moment or two listening with bent head at the foot of the stairs. She had removed her hat and coat, and I saw her as I had seen her often in her own home, but with a difference, for the humour of the situation had seized her and there was an air of ease and friendliness that banished constraint.

"You've brought the meal ? " she asked. "Then we'll make the poultice when your mother wakes ; and now we'll tidy up."

The way she said "we" thrilled me. It seemed too good to be true that I should be called upon to help a goddess to tidy a kitchen ; but I was to find that the goddess was a very practical young woman.

"Where does your mother keep her aprons?" was the first question, and I grew hot as I realised that I did not know.

I drew out a small drawer in the dresser and a ripple of laughter greeted this revelation of my ignorance. "I'm sure she doesn't keep them in the knife-drawer," she said. "What a man you are! Try the middle drawer down the side, or—no, I'll look myself. I'm not at all sure that you'd know an apron if you saw it."

Talk about intuition!—she was right first time, and in another moment the apron was on, and her instinct led her to another drawer where the dusters were kept. "I'm afraid your mother spoils you," she remarked, "but I won't. I'll give you a lesson in housewifery. Now watch!"

Watch! I should think I did watch. I daresay there were thousands of English girls who were fairer than she, but if she was not strikingly good-looking there was the subtle element of charm everywhere about her. The wine of life was in her eyes and the soul was reflected there as in a glass; and in her mobile lips, curved like the bow of Cupid, there dwelt a smile that rippled easily into laughter, and brought an answering smile from mine, as a clear echo brings response from a dead wall of rock.

"Now I'll slip upstairs and see if your mother is awake," she said, when we had been round the kitchen and every chair and shelf and ornament had received attention. "Take the kettle off when the water boils."

She called for me after a while and I went upstairs. A bowl of primroses stood on the table near mother's bed. The soiled counterpane had been replaced by a clean white one (though I did not notice this until mother pointed it out to me), and Mary was giving finishing touches with the duster to the dressing-table and its belongings.

"I think the Lord must have sent you," said mother with

a grateful sigh ; and as the remark had no reference to me I gave an unspoken but emphatic assent.

When we went downstairs again I was instructed in the art of poultice-making, and whilst the poultice was being applied I made Mary a cup of tea. This was one of the things I could do, though in doing it I was obeying a whispered injunction of mother ; and when the goddess came down she bantered me on my performance, and I ventured to banter her on her apron. Altogether the ice melted fast that afternoon in the temperature of our homely kitchen, and I believe we were both sorry when the time came for Mary to leave.

"But I'll come again to-morrow," she said.

Of course I wished to take her home and of course she refused, laughing my suggestions of danger in the lonely wood to scorn, and I could not press my offer. She remained with me, however, long after she had gone, and shared with Victoria some confused and whimsical dreams that were not entirely pleasant.

She came again the next day and was delighted with the improvement in mother, which she insisted was due to the effectiveness of my poultices ; and she allowed me to walk through the wood with her when she went home. She was so cheerful and chatty that I forgot all about barriers of rank, and I talked easily and lightheartedly myself.

Then she put a question to me that disturbed my peace and embarrassed me for a moment or two. "Mr. Turner, I want you to tell me all about Uncle David's business troubles ; if not now, at some other time. Will you ?"

She had called me Mr. Turner ever since her return from school, but there are different ways of saying prosaic things, and I detected a warmer intonation than I had ever noticed before, and was conscious of exhilaration even in my embarrassment.

I tried to laugh the question off, but saw by the shadow

that spread over her eyes that I had made a mistake, and I felt rebuked when she said:

"I'm not a child, and I know there's something wrong, and I want you to tell me everything. I must know"—she gave an imperious movement to her head as she said it that made her queen again. "Uncle laughs and treats me as if I were fourteen, but surely *you* can see that I am grown up, and that I have a right to know what it is that is making an old man of him."

Yes, I knew that she had grown up, and as I looked at her I knew for certain that it was something more than curiosity that had dictated the question, and I realised clearly that she would have to be told. But when? We had reached again the point where the path sloped abruptly down to the wooden bridge, and in less than five minutes we should be in sight of the Mill House. There was clearly no time for explanations that could not be hurried.

I told her so, and suggested that we might follow the path along the top of the wood; but after a moment's hesitation she shook her head. It was Sunday afternoon and there were many couples in the wood; it was not necessary for her to put her objection into words.

"Some evening, perhaps," she said; "when I call to see your mother. But you will tell me all, won't you? I hate to be kept in the dark." She emphasised the word "hate" with another determined gesture, and I gave the promise.

She stopped and held out her hand.

"Thank you ever so much. I know I can trust you. You see, if I'm to help Uncle David now that Aunt Ruth is so poorly I must know all, mustn't I?"

I believe I held the hand that she had lightly pressed away from my body as I walked slowly back, as though that member were of a different order from the rest; but my thoughts, strangely enough, were not of Mary Everard but of Victoria.

In a few days mother had recovered sufficiently to be able

to come downstairs, where Bella and 'Tilda were now able to render occasional help; and one evening when we were alone she opened her heart to me.

I have made it clear, I think, that mother's love for me, if not worn upon the sleeve, was genuine and deep-seated, and I know she was pleased that I had falsified the gloomy predictions of earlier years, and shaken off much of the dreaminess which I was supposed to have inherited from my father. It was a gratifying reflection in which she openly indulged at times, that this counteraction to inherited tendencies was to be attributed to the saving influences that came to me from "her side." All her hopes for the future were bound up in me. Heaven was a possibility, remote and rather unthinkable, but Hell would be realised here if by any chance the cup of my happiness should be dashed to the ground and destroyed. She entertained reverent feelings towards the Deity, though I do not suppose she would have been called a religious woman. After this evening I began to suspect that she had an idol, and was in danger of worshipping in secret at the shrine of her own son.

She was leaning back in her chair with a faded red shawl over her shoulders, and I had squatted down on a low stool at her feet. All at once I felt her fingers running through my hair in the way I had liked when I was a child, and with a touch that was more tender than of old. I pressed her knee with my head in acknowledgment, and she said, as if it took her an effort to begin:

"She's a grand lass, yon niece o' Mr. Middleton's, an' she's been a godsend, as you may say, this last week or so; an' I hope I haven't said more nor I should ha' said, but your tongue starts o' galloping sometimes afore you can fairly get hold o' t' reins."

I smiled. "What rash thing have you been saying? Nothing very serious, I'm sure."

"I got agate talking about you."

I grew hot and was glad my face was hidden from her. "That was a tame subject, anyhow," I said with as much indifference as I could throw into my voice. "It wouldn't interest Miss Mary much. But what is there to worry about?"

"I'm none wanting to worry. I'm same as t' old 'en 'at frets when t' young duck she's 'atched takes to t' water an' she loses t' end on it. I was telling Miss Mary 'at I'm terrified o' spoiling your life, Louis. You see, I used to think 'at you an' Vic 'ud be content to work at t' mill, an' 'appen get wed one day an' live in t' village, an' 'at I should be as 'appy as a queen. An' I should ha' been as proud o' your childer, if the Lord 'ad given you any—eh! I can't tell you. But I've thought about it many a time, an' 'ow they'd put their little arms round my neck an' call me 'Granny' . . . I think I must be going daft, lad. I've never known any o' my side ta'en soft like this."

Very slowly her fingers travelled through my hair; very delicate was her touch, and in some mysterious way it linked her soul to mine and gave me insight; and I said, as my pulse quickened:

"Well, mother, why shouldn't the dream come true? I hope it may. The only difference will be that Vic won't be working at the mill; but she will still be Vic."

"Yes, she'll allus be Vic, but even if you was to wed 'er it 'ud never be t' same. You'll be a gentleman an' she'll be a lady, an' you'll want to mix wi' your own set, same as t' duck; an' it's right enough—I don't blame you, lad; only, you see, I shall be out of it."

"Now come, mother," I said. "This isn't like you. You're not the sort to meet trouble."

"No, lad, I'm not; but wi' a straight road you sometimes can't miss seeing it coming. I should know I was i' t' way. Your friends 'ud chatter be'ind your back, and you'd 'ave to tell t' little 'uns 'at they mustn't talk like their granny; an'

yet I'm flayed I couldn't improve much. You can't take t' old 'orse an' put it into a circus."

"No, mother," I said. "You mustn't try to be a 'fine lady,' for people would laugh at you really then. The friends Vic and I make won't despise my mother, I'm sure. If they do they shall be my friends no longer. And Vic will know, even better than I, perhaps, how to make it all right for you."

"Suppose it didn't 'appen to be Vic?"

My heart beat madly, but I strove hard to control myself.

"I don't understand you," I said.

"Suppose you was to wed someb'dy else?"

"But that is silly, mother," I replied with unnecessary heat. "Why, of course I shall marry Vic. You don't think she'll forget me and fall in love with another fellow, do you, just because she's not with me every day? Surely you think better of her than that?"

"Eh, Louis, that's just like a man; it is, for all t' world. It never seems to enter into your 'ead 'at *you* might fall i' love wi' another lass, an' 'at Vic might 'ave to sup sorrow. I don't say 'at you won't wed 'er, mind you; an' if it be the Lord's will there's naught 'ud please me better. But mothers' eyes sees further nor young folks thinks, even mothers like me 'at 'asn't any book-learning; an' 'owever 'ard I look in front of me I can never see you two wed."

"But why, mother, why?" I protested. I felt a sense of shame, of intense humiliation—almost of pain. "I love her with all my heart."

"I'm sure you do, lad, an' yet—well, I don't know. I aren't clever enough to put it into words, but I 'ave thought at times 'at she isn't just your sort. I don't know why she isn't, but every now an' then your face used to tell me 'at there was summat wrong. You'd a look i' your eyes when she was talking, but *I* couldn't see what was amiss. An' now 'at she's away——"

I interrupted her. "It doesn't make any difference,

mother. "Nothing can make any difference," I said with troubled emphasis.

"Only a greater love, lad," she whispered. "But we're all in the Lord's 'ands; an' I've been talking to you like an old soft-'ead. You must forgive your mother, for old 'eads gets full o' whims same as old beams gets full o' cracks. Go back to your book an I'll put t' kettle on for a bit o' supper."

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. MIDDLETON SEES HIS BANK MANAGER

SUMMER came in that year like a rich and reckless spendthrift, bestowing largess of warm sunshine, of blue skies and dazzling cloud-drifts, of fresh and fragrant breezes; provoking the birds to rivalry in song, and inspiring hope in everybody. There were days together when the sky gave no hint of rain or storm, and all Nature in the lovely vale of Brier Dene basked in peace and contentment.

This serenity, however, was not reflected in the business world of D. & D. Middleton. There the clouds grew blacker and heavier from day to day, and a trace of fanaticism became visible, as I thought, in my master's religious enthusiasm. I might have expected this if I had had wider experience, for religion of that type has always and quite naturally yielded a large crop of fanatics, and I cannot agree with those who look upon these as weeds in the Christian field rather than true grain. For if the fanatic is always a danger to the community and an enemy of the cause he professes to serve, it is still true that he has generally some, and often many, of the qualities of the saint. There may be love, for instance, but without insight; zeal, not only without knowledge but without restraint; conviction without evidence; faith shackled to credulity; endurance linked to stubbornness.

Before he took me fully into his confidence I had come to see that it was because Mr. Middleton believed in God that he was allowing himself to be caught in the whirlpool of financial disaster; but I only half realised that his faith was

rapidly degenerating into frenzy, and that he was wilfully closing his eyes to every avenue of escape lest he should seem unwilling to bear some supreme test imposed or at any rate permitted by God.

I shall never forget the twenty-fourth of June that year. Even Broadbeck looked clean and attractive in the bright sunshine, and I entered the warehouse with a heart as light as my step, and peeped into the office to wish Tillotson and the rest a cheery good-morning. My business was with Tom in the top room.

I saw at a glance that something was wrong. Tillotson with a motion of the head summoned me to his desk and handed me the morning paper. "Audrians are down," he whispered; "it's a bad business. The boss wants you, but you'd better read this first."

It *was* a bad business. The Manchester firm of merchant shippers had not only collapsed, but the principal partner had absconded, and that ugly fact boded ill for the creditors. I wasted no time in discussing the situation with Tillotson, who appeared to be completely overwhelmed, but entered the private office and looked on my master with a sinking heart.

He was seated at his desk, but though his face was grey it was not more careworn than usual. He even smiled when he caught sight of me.

"It's taken your breath, Louis. Well, it took mine at first. Sit down till I finish signing these cheques. It's pay day, you know."

He went on with that work, writing the firm's name with the same bold strokes and thick underline that had been familiar in every bank in Broadbeck for a quarter of a century, and was just finishing when a clerk came in to say that the bank manager had sent to ask if Mr. Middleton would step across at once.

The change that came over my master was almost

startling. "No, I won't," he said with great irritation; "if he wants me he knows where to find me."

The man withdrew, but after a minute or so Tillotson entered, and before he had a chance to open his lips Mr. Middleton spoke.

"Well? I suppose you think I'd better go. I'll be hanged if I'll do anything of the sort, so you needn't waste your breath."

Poor Tillotson looked miserable enough. He had family troubles that kept him down, but he had plenty of common sense, and he was not deterred by his chief's ill-humour from pointing out that it would be very awkward if the bank should make any difficulty about honouring the cheques.

"You are right," said Mr. Middleton significantly; "it would be awkward—for them. How much are we overdrawn?"

Tillotson had the figures in his hand. "When to-day's accounts are paid," he said, "it will be between four and five thousand pounds. This unfortunate affair of Audrians' will make matters worse. They hold their bills for eight hundred."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Mr. Middleton; "it's a flea-bite. You're pulling as long a face as if I'd absconded myself. I'll change my mind for once, and go across and let steam off. It'll do me good. Put your hat on, Louis, and I'll give you a lesson in tackling bank managers when they try to carpet you."

We were kept waiting for nearly ten minutes at the bank, and as Mr. Middleton had come to let steam off and did not wish any to escape prematurely, he employed the interval in sitting on the safety valve, so that when we were at length admitted to the manager's presence there was a sudden outburst.

The manager, a dapper little man some ten years younger than his visitor, had risen and held out his hand, but Mr.

Middleton was too full of wrath to observe conventional courtesies.

"You've sent for me and I've come," he said, holding his chin very high and speaking in a hard but not loud voice. It was not his custom to get into a towering rage, but his feelings were working at high pressure all the same.

The manager glanced at him and took in the situation. I believe he stood rather in awe of his client, but I suppose he was too accustomed to interviews of this kind to be really discomposed, and he replied:

"Thank you, Mr. Middleton. I am glad to see you. Take a seat."

"Thank *you*," said Mr. Middleton shortly; "we can stand. We don't propose to stay long. It's a busy day. Say what you have to say and then I'll have my turn and go."

"I'm sorry you won't sit down," replied the other. "There is no reason why there should be any unpleasantness. I merely asked you to call because I thought we ought to have a little conversation about your account—quite as much in your interests as in ours."

"Look here, Lowther," broke in Mr. Middleton; "this is the first time I've ever been carpeted by a bank, and I tell you candidly I don't like it. You can gloss your words as you please, but that's what it amounts to. If you wanted to see me you knew where to find me."

I felt very awkward and ashamed, and rather admired Mr. Lowther's control of himself as he replied:

"Just so, but you must excuse me for reminding you, Mr. Middleton, that you are seeking accommodation from us; and as your account has been rather heavily overdrawn without any consent on our part, it is only reasonable that I should ask you to come and discuss the matter with me."

My master brought his clenched fist down upon the table.

"Do you think I'm tied to your bank, then? Are there no other banks in Broadbeck? Why, confound it——"

The manager interrupted him.

"There are, of course, other banks in the town, and you might find one or more that would be glad of your account; but we needn't discuss that, surely. We haven't declined it yet, and, what is more, we haven't made any difficulties for you. Why not discuss this matter reasonably, Mr. Middleton?"

With a great effort Mr. Middleton restrained himself. He even sat down, and bade me do so, though the hard look upon his face became harder. "Go on, then," he said.

"Well, first of all about this overdraft. We have no objection to allowing you such facilities as we may agree upon, but we ought to have security."

"You have security!"

"I wasn't aware of it," replied the manager in a tone of surprise.

"You've the reputation for honesty and straightforward dealing of David Middleton—that's security enough for all I shall ask of you."

The manager smiled, and this infuriated my master; but before he could continue Mr. Lowther said:

"Everybody knows you are straight, Mr. Middleton, and none better than I. But we are both business men and we must proceed on business lines. You cannot object to giving us a more marketable security if you need our assistance."

"I suppose you would like the deeds of my property and my life-assurance policies, and any other little oddments of that kind," said Mr. Middleton. "Well, listen to me, Lowther: you aren't going to have them. Do you hear? *You aren't going to have them.*"

He bent forward and stared into the eyes of his opponent, who leaned back in his chair and eyed him steadily, but with increasing impatience.

"But why do you adopt this unreasonable attitude? I've never known such a stand to be taken in all my experience."

"If your clients are rogues and vagabonds you may treat them as such," replied Mr. Middleton; "but if you are going to class me with them I'm not going to be classed, that's all. Why, man, I've fifty thousand pounds' worth of stock in my warehouse, and not a penny mortgage on any of my property; and now because I've overdrawn three or four thousand pounds you think you can wipe your feet on me. But you've got the wrong pig by the ear this time, let me tell you."

The manager's temper was rising now and the danger-signal appeared in his eyes, but my master was letting off so much steam that he did not notice it.

"It isn't a question of a few thousands merely," the manager replied. "What about all these bills of Blunts' we are discounting for you? I wanted to warn you and to tell you what we have learned, but if you won't listen and will do nothing but abuse me you may find out for yourself. Only you must understand this: we won't discount another of their bills. We will hold them in a suspense account, of course, but we won't cash them."

"Oh, you won't?"

"We won't."

"Then somebody else will."

"Then somebody else may; we won't."

"May I ask why?" Mr. Middleton was growing calmer as the pallor of his face increased.

"Certainly you may; it was for that purpose I sent for you, principally. Briefly it is this. We have discovered that the foreign and colonial houses upon whom these long-date bills are drawn are no other than Blunt, Sharpe and Co. themselves."

"What!" My master jumped to his feet, and I grew faint.

"It's true. We have absolutely reliable information. Blunts opened these houses themselves, but not in their own

name. They gave a different name to each firm and so concealed their personal connection with it; but every bill we hold is really Blunts' bill; so now you know where you are."

Mr. Middleton was stunned for the moment. If it were true then all our eggs were in one basket with a vengeance. "I don't believe it," he ejaculated at length.

"It's true," replied Mr. Lowther, "whether you believe it or not; and that is why I say we shall not discount any more of them. Why, man, do you realise that we hold thirty thousand pounds in their bills alone? If anything should happen to Blunts' where are you, and where are we?"

Mr. Middleton sat still and said nothing, but looked blankly at me. He had lost his footing for the moment. If this were true—and the manager spoke with conviction—what became of his confidence in his father's friend? Could he believe that Mr. Blunt would so deceive him?

"I don't believe it," he repeated.

"Well, I have told you now," replied the other sharply. "Naturally, I shall tell no one else; but I ought also to say to you that two at least of those firms are reported to be unsound. If you won't guard your own interests we shall ours; we must."

Again there was a pause before Mr. Middleton spoke, and my spirits became heavy as lead as I listened to him.

"I won't give you any security," he said.

"Very well, then I must consult my directors," said the other, rising.

"You can consult whom you like," said my master, rising also. "I'm paying my accounts to-day. Will the cheques be met?"

"We shall honour them this time," said the manager pointedly.

"I'm glad you've so much sense," said Mr. Middleton. "I'll wish you good-morning, Lowther. Come, Louis!"

I could not conceal an expression of hopelessness that was

probably tinged with disgust as the manager glanced at me. I had not spoken a word all the time, but he correctly interpreted my thoughts and shrugged his shoulders meaningly as he held the door open for us to pass out.

Once in the street again Mr. Middleton turned in the direction of the warehouse, then paused and reflected a moment or two. "We'll try somewhere else, Louis," he said, and strode on to another bank a stone's-throw away.

I waited for him outside, and he was out again in ten minutes with thunder on his brow. "He's a bigger fool than the other," he said in explanation. "We'll see what the 'Union' will do."

The "Union" would do nothing, though a full half-hour was wasted there in argument. Neither bank wanted the account when the situation had been explained, and as we walked back to the warehouse Mr. Middleton admitted that it was Blunts' bills that were the obstacle.

"I must think it out, Louis," he said with more cheerfulness than I could have thought possible. "It takes more than this to bowl David Middleton over, and I won't believe it of Blunt."

Marshall succeeded in bowling him over where bank managers had failed. The little man was walking about in front of the warehouse and at sight of us he quickened his steps. "You're wanted at home, sir, quick," he said, laying his hand on his master's arm sympathetically. Mr. Middleton stopped, went white, and involuntarily put his hand over his heart, but the question in his eye did not leave his lips.

Marshall nodded. "We can just get t' one-ten," he said, "an' t 'mare's at Bexla station. She went sudden soon after eleven,an' Miss Mary said I was to tell you 'at she went easy."

It was in this way that David Middleton learned that his wife was dead. He turned without a word, and walked away quickly but with bowed head; and the look upon his face haunted me all the rest of the day.

CHAPTER XXIV

VICTORIA COMES HOME

MR. MIDDLETON had walked away bent, but this new and greater misfortune did not break him, for in the hour of trial he was sustained by his faith in God and the love and devotion of his niece. I came to understand at a later date that one consideration in particular helped to reconcile him to the loss of his wife; namely, that she had been spared the experience of humiliation that seemed to threaten him. I would not be misunderstood. Mrs. Middleton would have been as ready as her husband to face a reverse of fortune, and would have done so with the same dogged confidence that it was God's will and therefore the highest good; but she was an ailing woman, and it would have intensified Mr. Middleton's sufferings beyond measure if she had been forced to forego any of the comforts her condition called for. If it was an additional trial of his faith it was also, as he viewed it, a proof of God's mercy that she had been taken away before the evil days should come.

He showed remarkable courage during the weeks that followed, and under the influence of Mary's winsome ways developed an almost boyish cheerfulness at times. He liked me to spend an hour in the evening with them, and it made my heart dance to see how Mary studied and anticipated his wants, and tried not so much to take her aunt's place as to occupy her own. Seth, who was also a frequent visitor, sang her praises to an appreciative audience when he

got home, and Susan was always ready to demand an encore.

"All t' same," said Marshall, "he's that sort, is David, 'at'll be t' Prime Minister, choose what change there is i' t' Guv'ment."

"Aye," returned Seth, with a knowing turn of the head, "but ther's such a thing, John, as t' Prime Minister being ruled by t' 'Ome Secretary; an' Miss Mary knows how to dress her warp, I can tell you."

Marshall was not convinced. "She can hold t' reins nicely, I don't deny," he answered; "an' he'll go sweet an' steady wi' his head well up as long as he's going his own road; but he always keeps t' bit between his teeth, does David, an' he'll go nowhere but where he wants. When all's said an' done, Miss Mary is only a woman, an' how the hangment——"

"*Only* a woman!" Seth interrupted, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Best say no more, lad; it's a book you 'aven't read in. Steam's only water, but it runs t' looms; an' gunpowder's only saltpetre an' a toathri more simple things, but it can shift more rock i' ten seconds nor t' pick can hack out i' ten weeks. Besides, Miss Mary isn't only a woman, she's a *young* woman."

Marshall grunted. "Aye," continued Seth humorously, "but you've got to reckon wi' 't. They bide watching at all ages, John, but they're most dangerous when they're young. You read your Bible. If Vashti had ha' been queen, old Mordecai 'ud ha' hung on t' gallows i'stead o' Haman; but because Esther was young an' fair she could twist t' king round her little finger."

"She was a fresh 'un," commented Marshall grimly; "an' she wasn't his niece."

"Right enough," Seth admitted, "but I'll bet David 'olds out t' royal sceptre to Miss Mary ofter nor he would ha' done to her aunt."

This was mere pleasantry, and Mary's services to her uncle lay rather in the direction of love and tender sympathy than in any deliberate attempt to guide and control him; and indeed events marched far too quickly to give her much opportunity of that kind.

August came, and with it Victoria. If I had developed physically she had surpassed me even there. Although only twenty-two she was a well-made woman, tall, muscular, and of almost masculine build. I suppose her face would still have been called plain, but few looked upon it without wishing to look again and finding pleasure in the scrutiny. Sound common sense, firmness softened by kindness, the capacity to understand and communicate—all these were written large upon her features in those indefinable characters which even the ignorant can read. She brought light and new life into our home, for, undemonstrative as mother was, she loved the brave-hearted girl who had been a daughter to her, and who was wholly unspoiled by success; and she was very dear to me.

"You'd pass for thirty, lass; easy, you would," said mother with her usual candour; "an' ther' isn't so many women 'at cares to look more than their age; though I allus have done. My side allus ripened young an' withered a long time afore they fell; though I don't know 'at it's aught to make a boast about."

"I daresay it helps me," laughed Victoria; "people think I know more, you see. I only wish I were younger, so that I might have more time for study."

"Well, if you ask me," said mother wearily, "I think this Master of Arts business is a lot o' rubbish. I don't see but what you'd ha' been just as happy an' maybe happier if you'd stopped at t' mill. It passes me what it's all about, but it's Bible truth 'at them 'at increases knowledge increases sorrow."

Mr. Truman held very different views from these, and he

was, I know, immensely proud of her. I left the mill an hour earlier one afternoon and called for her at his house by arrangement.

She was reading a manuscript with evident interest, and he was leaning back in his chair, with the tips of his outstretched fingers keeping time with the tapping of his foot. He took absolutely no notice of me, but looked half-curiously, half-anxiously in the girl's face. There was nothing to be read there, however, until having reached the end Victoria laid the paper on the table before her and smiled.

"Well?" inquired Mr. Truman.

The smile broadened but she said nothing, and Mr. Truman's face contorted.

"Deuce take it, girl, what are you grinning like that for? I say what's the use of pulling faces over it? What I want is your opinion."

"Favourable or unbiassed?" queried Victoria.

"Now may all the gods take the girl! There's no satisfaction to be got out of women; hang it, there isn't a scrap of satisfaction. There's always too much either of the tiger or the kitten in them—a dashed sight too much. Girl, I'm not a mouse to be played with, and I'm not a spoiled child to pout if you frown on me. You ought to know that. Are you going to tell me what you think of it?"

Victoria still smiled. "Casuistry!" she replied; "absolutely undiluted; and you knew it when you wrote it."

"The dickens I did!" said the excitable man, reaching forward for the sheets and tossing them on to the floor. "I suppose you're able to tell me what Truth is. Deuce take it, the universe has yielded up its mysteries to a schoolgirl. There's nothing more to be said . . . I tell you, I have done; I will say no more."

He stooped down and gathered up the papers, and with a show of deliberation placed them in the waste basket.

Meantime Victoria continued to smile; but she rose, too, and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

They were a fine pair. Tall as he was she was almost as tall, and in the eyes of each was the light of understanding. The years had dealt gently with our tutor, and even yet his age might well have been a matter of dispute.

"You've been carried away by this new-fangled doctrine of Blickschauer's, Mr. Truman," she said; "or rather your pen has, and you don't believe a word of it. It's very interesting but it isn't true. Now don't eat me!"

Mr. Truman shook himself free and began to straighten the papers on his desk. "Women are the devil!" he remarked with emphasis; "I tell you they are. The Ancients knew it . . . they certainly knew it. There wasn't a woman in all their mythology who didn't make mischief of some kind . . . I say there wasn't one. If I had only the power of Mercury, by Jove, I'd turn you all into tortoises. . . . I tell you I would; and the world should have silence and peace."

"Minerva made her father's head ache when she came out of it full-grown," said Victoria.

"She did; hang it, girl, she did. But she didn't hurl the thunder at him . . . she stopped short of that."

"I knew you wouldn't like it," remarked Victoria.

Mr. Truman overturned the paper-basket with his foot, and took up the condemned manuscript, which he tore into small pieces before her eyes.

"Come in again to-morrow," he said, holding out his hand and without a trace of displeasure. "You've given me enough to digest for one day—confound it all!"

We took the road that wound over the Knoll, but instead of turning on to the Ridge we followed the field path that led to the Rock Wood, and there we sat down at the very spot where Mr. Middleton and I had stood six years before, when Mr. Truman had made his unwelcome appearance.

I was in a state of miserable happiness that I dared not analyse. I knew that I loved Victoria and that the thought of her warmed my heart, but I also knew that the thought of another made it bound and burn ; and this frightened me, especially as I could see that Victoria loved me wholeheartedly. I felt that I must conquer this disloyalty to the dear old Vic who had encouraged me to effort, stimulated me when my will had flagged, and never once failed me in any circumstance of life, and who was still as devoted as ever.

We had said little as we walked along, and now that we were seated Victoria was the first to speak.

" Do you remember our conversation on the Ridge, Louis, before I went up ? Well, I've found heaps of treasure, but not that particular pearl of great price that we were talking of.

I ventured to look into her face, for there was meaning in her words, and I wondered how much she suspected—how much she knew. I had not the key, however and I dropped my eyes and muttered a protest.

" I will tell you what I overheard one night just before I came away," she continued. " I have been giving occasional lectures on popular philosophical subjects at a Society my chief is interested in, and on this occasion there had been quite a number of people ; and when it was over I slipped on my hat and veil and was soon just one among the crowd.

" Two ladies were discussing my effort, and one of them said, to my vast amusement : ' She's a very clever young woman, isn't she ? ' ' Extremely clever,' the other replied, ' and most interesting.' (You see I tell you all, Louis, with my customary modesty.) ' She has risen from the ranks, I should say,' the first one went on. ' Oh, obviously,' the other said ; ' you can always tell. There is never quite the same tone, is there ? ' You see your jewel doesn't deceive the experts, Louis."

I never admired her more than at that moment. "The only expression that comes to me, Vic," I said, "is the old boyish one, 'You are just splendid.' These metaphors or analogies are very inadequate. I am older now, and I shouldn't use the same arguments as I did four years ago. The mysterious something you haven't got doesn't affect your worth by one iota. Your praise is in everybody's mouth, and I'm prouder of you than ever."

"All the same," said Victoria, "it affects my value in certain markets, you know; but I'm not worrying about it now. After all, it's childish to complain because iron isn't gold; only I want you to realise that though I'm nicely gilded yet the alchemy has failed."

"Mr. Truman doesn't think so."

"Mr. Truman doesn't care anything about it. It's learning that appeals to him. He's very generous in his compliments and perhaps not quite sincere."

"That's nonsense," I replied, "and anyhow it makes no difference, does it?"

"Only this," she said firmly: "that we needn't feel we have to play at sweethearts as we did when we were children."

How my heart beat! I did not understand myself at that moment, for though I faintly realised that another suitor was knocking at the door of my heart I felt a pang of jealousy at the mere suggestion of the denial of Victoria's love. I therefore said somewhat bitterly:

"Then you no longer love me?"

She did not reply for a moment or two, but her hand was in mine and through it I felt the commotion of her breast.

"I shall always love you," she replied; "but I have my work to do—work to which I am called, and I mustn't think of marriage. Why should we be boy and girl any longer, Louis? Of course we love each other, and when you are

married we shall still do so. Love like ours won't alter, old boy."

I knew she was right, knew that my love for her had not changed, but I said:

"Then you won't marry me? Not under any circumstances? I didn't expect this, Vic."

We are strange creatures, we men. At that moment I was unutterably wretched, and she saw it but did not waver.

"Don't grieve about it, Louis," she said. "I love you as I never loved you before, but I can't marry you. You see, there are so many kinds of love."

"I will make you want to marry me," I said savagely. I——"

"Don't, Louis," she broke in, and seeing the pain in her eyes I paused. "Don't let us talk about it any more just now," she went on. "Tell me about your business troubles; about Mr. Middleton. Tell me everything."

I controlled myself with an effort, and she listened intently to all I had to say, interposing a question now and then that told equally of sincere interest and an alert mind.

"No wonder you're depressed," she said when the story was ended. "Poor Mr. Middleton! He was so good to me. I don't like to think of him as a sad and broken-hearted man. What a tragedy life is!"

She sighed as she said it and rose to her feet.

"Mr. Middleton isn't sad," I said as I got up too, "and he's certainly very far from broken-hearted. He takes a real pleasure in making a bed of thorns for himself. He is the sort of stuff fakirs are made of."

"Poor Mr. Middleton!" she repeated.

Far below us a woman was toiling up the rough path. She had a basket on her right arm and held the hand of a little child, who slipped on the smooth rocks and made slow progress. There was an air of weariness about them both, and we watched their slow ascent without speaking.

Away in the distance behind them we saw a tall man who climbed the path with firm and fairly rapid steps. By and bye he got up to them and we saw the woman draw the child aside to let him pass. The man stopped, however, and spoke to the woman, then stooped and lifted the child on to his shoulder, holding her there securely with his left hand; and placing his right hand under the woman's arm he helped her up the rough and rocky path. It was Mr. Middleton.

"Come away, Louis," said Victoria hurriedly, and we turned aside among the trees until they had passed. When I looked at Victoria I saw that tears were in her eyes; and in my ears like a far-away echo from the past the words reverberated again and again, "That's equipoise, my lad!"

"No, he isn't broken-hearted exactly," Victoria said with pride in her voice.

CHAPTER XXV

MARY HEARS ALL ABOUT IT

SLEEP failed me that night, and if I had yielded to my first impulse I should not have gone to bed at all, for I was feverish and excited and my brain was busy with fateful problems. I felt the need of the cold night air and the wide solitude of the fields. I thought if I could only climb the hills and inhale the spirit of peace that brooded over the slumbering valley the troubled waters of my soul might be stilled. I do not think anguish is too strong a word to describe the state of my mind. I was in the throes of mental travail and did not know what the issue was to be. I forced myself to realise that it was Mary Everard whom I loved and that Victoria had guessed my secret, and I tried to face the situation as an honest man should.

I did not light my candle, and I pushed the window open to its full extent and let the cool night air play upon my brow, and I tried to hear the still, small voice of God. I never doubted that it could be heard. My early training in the dales had given me a very simple creed, and I had been taught to believe in the efficacy of prayer and to expect an answer to it, even though the answer should be a refusal. But the old vicar of my boyhood's days had insisted that God's readiness to guide and help did not relieve a man from the necessity of exercising judgment and common sense. That was why Mr. Middleton's religion made no appeal to me; judged by my simple standard it was altogether

faulty; and if I reverenced him it was in spite of his creed, because I knew him to be better than his creed.

So now I asked God to speak to me; but I was not calm enough to wait and listen, and I immediately began to speak to myself. Was not duty, I urged, always the will of God? Was it not my plain duty to marry Victoria? She had admitted that she loved me—was she to suffer because I had discovered another love, hotter, deeper, stronger?

And if I should marry her, what then? Would it be right to offer her the poor pretence of a heart where another was enthroned? Was it fair to her—to myself? Could mockery of that kind be pleasing to God?

I have no difficulty in answering the question to-day, but I was a young man of twenty-three then, torn by conflicting emotions, too confused and passionate to judge calmly.

As I battled with my thoughts I turned my eyes to the square of sky that was visible from my window and saw that in all the black expanse there were just two stars, and of these one was by far the brighter. I knew it for the planet Venus and remembered that Venus was the mother of Love. I had always professed a lofty scorn for superstition, but my mind was unhinged that night; and by and bye I caught myself fancying that these two stars represented my two loves, and that the big and brilliant one was Victoria.

"Poor little star," I murmured; "how lonely you look and how beautiful, though you are dwarfed by your big sister. I wonder if you will still be shining when Venus has set. Perhaps I have my answer in you; who knows?"

Even as the thought took form the little star grew dim. Some distant cloud wrapped it in its folds and it was lost in the darkness.

The perspiration stood cold upon my forehead as I turned away. "I have my answer," I said. "I must be true to Vic. God help me to make her happy."

It was childish, even foolish, but it was a decision and it quieted me. I threw off some clothes and lay down upon my bed, and though no sleep came the storm within was stilled.

I told Victoria that I should forget her words and she must never repeat them, for I knew her heart; and she looked tenderly into my eyes and said nothing.

I thought Providence was dealing hardly with me when I found myself alone with Mary the next evening. There are times when Providence does seem to take the rôle of Puck and play tricks on men for mere sport; but I was determined to be on my guard. It came about in this way.

I had been out of town in the afternoon and it was very desirable that I should see Mr. Middleton that night, but when I called at the Mill House I found that he was in Broadbeck and would not be back until late; and Mary caught sight of me as I turned to leave, and beckoned me into the drawing-room.

My pulse beat quickly, but it was with a sinking heart that I followed her, and I was afraid she would notice my embarrassment. She could not have done so, however, for she said as she closed the door:

"I'm awfully glad you've come to-night. I've been hoping you would, and it's so fortunate that uncle's out, because there's something I want to tell you and something I want you to tell me. I'll have first turn, shall I?"

She was dressed in black, but her gown fitted her perfectly, and its sombreness was relieved by the mellow evening light that filled the room. Her movements were so graceful, her whole attitude was so easy and cordial, that my heart throbbed more furiously than ever. She sat down in an easy-chair near the window that overlooked the lawn, and I took the only other one that was available, so that we were close together.

"I've seen Victoria," she said, turning her lustrous eyes

on mine and speaking with enthusiasm. "She's splendid, isn't she?"

I fear the blood rushed to my cheeks, but I forced a laugh and gave a warm assent.

They had met at the little stone bridge higher up the valley, where the streamlet is so tiny that in dry weather one could leap across, and a stone slab makes a sufficient footway. Mary had come by the fieldpath and stood in the sunshine, and Victoria was in the shadow of the wood, and each had waited to give the other precedence.

"Then we both laughed," said Mary, "and in the end Vic (she says I may call her Vic) came across and we went away up the blackberry lane and on to the moors, and we've sworn to be friends for ever and ever."

I suppose I said I was pleased, but I was too busy considering the possibilities of the new situation to be very adroit, and Mary went on:

"She's done me heaps of good. I was rather in the dumps when we met, but I was as fresh as a daisy when we parted. She's the nicest tonic I've ever had, and I only wish I could take her three times a day. Now the question is, how often can you spare her?"

Victoria must have lasted nearly half an hour as a topic of conversation, and I was beginning to feel more at ease, when there came a quick digression:

"And now I want you to tell me everything about uncle and the business—everything."

She smiled as she made the demand—for it was more than a request—but her lips closed firmly and there was a perceptible contracting of the brows as she bent her head and settled into an attitude of close attention.

I had anticipated this hour again and again and rehearsed my part. I had decided that it was best to be frank, and I did not hesitate. I told her how the pieces were rotting in the warehouse; how the trade had changed; how deter-

mined her uncle was to close his eyes to facts and pursue his own course. Until I paused she never once removed her eyes from mine, nor did she interrupt me. Then:

"You have told me all?" she asked.

"All I ought to tell," I replied, "but I hate to trouble you. You mustn't let it worry you too much."

"You don't know me," she answered, "if you think that this is going to make me cry like a child whose toys are to be taken away. I don't care about the toys, but I do care about uncle, and I want you to help me to find out if there's anything I can do to save him. You've told me the facts; tell me now the causes, and remember you've not to hide anything because I'm his niece. I can't help him if I don't know all."

She was firm and rather dignified, perhaps, but she could not keep the troubled note out of her voice altogether, and her eyes grew strained, so that I turned mine away as I told her what I knew of the influence of a religious thought, and also what I guessed.

She sighed as if relieved when I had finished.

"Aunt Ruth was just the same," she said. "Theirs is such a strange God, isn't He? She thought, and uncle thinks, that the more they suffer the better He is pleased. You do explain things well, but I don't see the least little bit what we are going to do. I know my uncle: he's hard as the rock where religion is concerned. He nails himself to obstinacy and calls it principle. If he thinks he's treading God's appointed path nothing will move him. Do you know how this began?" And she told me the story of Alderman Blunt and the Winepress, as I have already related it.

"Miss Everard," I said, "your uncle can be saved if he will listen to reason and sink his pride. If you can't persuade him I almost despair."

"If it were only pride," she said sadly; "but don't you

see that he thinks God is trying him in the furnace of affliction, and he isn't going to shirk the test? What can one do if a man asks to be a martyr?"

"I'm awfully sorry for him—and for you," I said. "It's like a man pulling down his own house over his ears."

"Don't worry about me," she said, and she laid her hand on my arm with a tender touch that thrilled me and made my heart leap. "It won't break my heart to be poor. I've a thousand pounds of my own, and that's something, isn't it? If uncle is content we will live happily in a cottage like yours and I will make it so bright and pretty that he won't mind the loss of other comforts. After all, it isn't having money and servants and a big house that makes people happy, is it? I shall serve him for love, and if he should become miserable and begin to brood over the past I shall sing the old songs he loves and coax him to forget his troubles, and he will soon come round. I've thought it all out, and I can do as I like with my own money, can't I? for I shall be twenty-one in November."

I smiled. One would have said that she had dwelt upon this thought until she had begun to anticipate the delights of poverty.

"I hope it won't come to that, all the same," I said. "We must try to save your uncle, and there is one argument you may use. I hardly dare think about it, much less mention it, but do you know that some years ago your uncle opened a kind of bank for the workpeople's savings, and that we have nearly two thousand pounds of their money in the business?"

The next moment I was sorry I had spoken. She had a wonderfully quick intelligence, and though it was dusk I saw the light die in her eyes and anxiety and fear creep in and fill them, and I knew why her right hand was pressing her breast.

"Oh, Louis!" she said, forgetting conventionality under

the stress of sudden pain; "can't they be warned? Can't they withdraw it?" She almost choked as she spoke, and her eyes grew wild.

"No," I said; "that would ruin everything; it would destroy their last chance of payment. Your uncle needn't be ruined; the position isn't hopeless yet. Can't you remind him of the workpeople's confidence in him? I daren't do it, but you have great influence. Suggest the sale of stock—anything to save these poor folk from ruin. And if he saves them he will save himself."

She was trembling now and very white. She drew out her handkerchief and put it to her eyes, resting her elbow upon the arm of the chair and her head upon her hand, and her whole attitude told of the extremity of despair.

"I never dreamt of this," she said. "It's awful. What can we do?"

I saw the heaving of her bosom and realised that she was crying. It was almost dark in the room now, and I feared lest a maid should enter and find us in this situation. I began to call myself hard names for not having taken my courage in my hands and told Mr. Middleton myself. To make matters worse the sobs were becoming audible; and at the sight of her distress remorse and pity unbarred the door that love had resolutely bolted.

"Mary!" I said, putting my hand upon her arm; "Mary, don't cry. I have been a brute. I didn't realise how this would affect you. Let me dry your tears——"

She turned her head away a very little, but I thought the violence of her grief abated, and I went on pleadingly:

"I will tell your uncle myself. No doubt he will listen to me. I was a fool to put this burden on you. I love you too well to——"

I stopped, aghast at my boldness, and the blood rushed to my face as I realised what I had done. Mary, however,

dried her eyes, and did not appear to notice what I had said. I told myself that perhaps she had not heard.

"You will think me a baby," she said in a low, sweet voice; and she did not call me by my name this time. "You did right to tell me—didn't I bid you tell me everything? It was the suddenness of it. I can't bear to think of this. Uncle and I can live together anywhere. I will work for him, if anyone will give me work, and we will live in a little home and be quite happy; but if our people lose all their money——"

"They shan't lose it," I said. "Don't let it worry you another moment. I promise you they shall be paid in full."

They were reckless words, but I would have promised her the throne of England if it would have softened her distress. I was agitated myself and spoke like a fool.,

She took no notice of my rashness, however, but said, as she rose slowly to her feet:

"You're very good. It is such a comfort to me to know that you care for—us. I think I must go to my room now, for my head aches rather badly, and I must think and think. I'm not a coward really; but—you will ask Vic to come to me to-morrow, won't you?"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PROBLEM OF JOB

DUTY called Victoria back to London before long, but in the meantime she and Mary had become firm friends. It interested me to note how their natures reacted on each other, though I had more opportunities of observing the effect of the intimacy upon Victoria than upon Mary, for I avoided the Mill House as much as I could, and I believe my motive was not misunderstood by its mistress. Victoria was very gentle when she went away, but much more self-possessed than I, for she had a conscience that did not trouble her.

It was different with me, and I sought salvation in hard and incessant work. I was usually up and dressed long before the "buzzer" sounded its call at half-past five, and I was invariably the first to enter the mill. Most mornings I went to town soon after breakfast, and twice a week I journeyed to Manchester on the firm's business. Whatever might happen during the day, I generally contrived to put in an hour at the mill in the evening. In this way I sought to avoid thought and to shut my eyes to a reality.

It was all in vain. The image of Mary was always before me: it smiled up at me from the blue paper on which I traced my designs, from the page of the book where I made my calculations. I busied myself with market reports as I sat in the train, but a graceful form in a black dress confronted me from the opposite seat whenever I raised my eyes, and looked at me in a way that sent me crazy. And

at sight of her my heart always broke bounds and cried "She loves me; I know it!" and an answering voice whispered, "She is yours; take her!" I tried to stifle the voices; I told myself I would not listen; I fought hard, but these reflections hurled themselves against my will, shouted triumphantly in my ears,—laughed and shouted as they pressed riotously forward with the confidence of those who know that the resistance is half-hearted, and that there are friends within the gates.

Yet, after all, what grounds had I for hope, much less for confidence? One look! But in that one look soul had spoken to soul with that clear utterance that could not be misunderstood. And I had said I loved her, and though she had not seemed to hear yet who could tell?

That was one ingredient in the cup of my disquiet; another was the continued stubbornness of my master.

I had succeeded in convincing him that the demand for fancies was likely to continue, but my influence had not been great enough to induce him to make the sacrifice involved in the sale of his stock of plain goods, although week by week the clouds gathered upon the horizon and spread across the sky of his prosperity.

When he had charged Mr. Blunt with duplicity the old man had defended himself with some vigour and a free recourse to Scripture, but had entirely failed to re-establish himself in Mr. Middleton's confidence, and relations in that quarter were very strained.

So matters progressed until October, when the storm-clouds grew really black and there came the first forked-lightning flash.

The engine had just started at the Valley Mill one afternoon and I was busily engaged at my desk, when I was startled by the abrupt entrance of my master, who tossed a letter on to the open book in front of me and waited for me to read it. It was from our bankers, and as I handed it back

I looked up, and seeing the ashen colour of Mr. Middleton's face I tried to speak courageously.

"Straight enough, isn't it? Well, if we've got to reduce the overdraft at once, we must set to work and do it."

We were alone in the office, and Mr. Middleton drew a chair up to the stove, turned it round, and sat there with his arms folded over the back.

"Do you realise what this ultimatum means to me, Louis?" he asked, speaking with great deliberation. "Do you realise that the bank think they have me in a cleft stick and are going to make me eat humble-pie? I'd give every penny I have to thwart 'em, but there's nothing I can do; absolutely nothing, and they know it."

I had got down from my stool and was leaning against the desk. "What would you do if you could?" I asked.

"Pay 'em off every penny and take the account elsewhere. I'd sell the shirt off my back to do it."

"Before I would sell the shirt off my back," I said firmly, "I would sell the pieces we keep arguing about. They won't fetch as much now by a long way as they would have done six months ago, but I can sell them for something that will reduce the overdraft, if it doesn't wipe it off."

Mr. Middleton bit his lip. "I've been strongly tempted of the devil this morning, Louis. He made a suggestion which I came very near to accepting. I sat down and wrote a letter to Lowther telling him I wouldn't reduce the overdraft and he could do what he liked. But I tore it up again; it wouldn't have been fair to others who have to be considered. If it were not for them I would do it and Lowther could whistle for his money. It would serve him right. He's no security."

"Why not see Mr. Lowther?" I ventured.

"I'll see nobody. I won't humiliate myself any further. I'm as solvent as any man in Broadbeck, and there are limits beyond which no man on earth will persuade me to go.

When I think of the way that little beggar has cringed to me, and how he now tries to lord it over me whenever he sees me, my blood boils. I'd like to ram his beastly letter down his throat."

"I would get out of the mess at any cost," I said, taking advantage of his mood; "it's bound to irritate you, and I would rather lose ten thousand pounds in the sale of the stock than have to suffer all this indignity. Besides, Mr. Middleton, it's beginning to tell upon your health; anyone can see it."

"Beginning, is it? It strikes me it began long since. I'm not half the man I was three or four years ago. But health has nothing to do with it. My principles haven't changed; I'm as straight now as I ever was; I'm just as anxious, aye, and just as able to pay everybody twenty shillings in the pound as I ever was. And it goes against the grain, I can tell you, to give stuff away in order to throw a sop to a yelping little cur like Lowther; it does that." He frowned heavily and repeated in an undertone, "the yelping little cur."

I did not agree with him in his estimate of Mr. Lowther, who I considered had been very patient; but I waited, for I had no other suggestion to offer.

"Well, if that's all you can suggest," he said at length, "I shall have to give in. I won't let my creditors run any risk. I'll have a spoonful of the pie now, Louis. Get the stock sold, and be hanged to it."

My heart leaped, but I strove to speak calmly. "What part of it must I offer?"

"Offer the lot, and don't ask me what you're to sell it for. If I have to eat humble pie I'll eat it in my own office. You can please yourself what you sell and what price you take. You may sell every piece and we'll clear the beggars off if it doesn't leave me a penny; and as soon as I can I'll clear them off in another sense; that I will."

"I'll attend to it at once," I said, anxious to seize the golden moment. "I'll get down to Broadbeck and arrange matters with Tom, and I can see one or two firms this afternoon. You may rely on me to do my best."

"You needn't be in such a hurry," said my master; "the pieces won't run away and I shan't change my mind. Put your hat and coat on and we'll go where we can talk without being interrupted. I've had enough office for one day."

I sought out Joss and then followed my master on to the highroad, and we walked up the village together, speaking little, and so came at length to the lane that leads to the moor. It is rising ground all the way, but Mr. Middleton had set a quick pace, and it was not until we had climbed the stile and had the steep brow of the hill to breast that he slackened.

It was a fine autumn day. The sky was grey, with patches and streaks of amber to relieve and lighten it. The breeze nipped a little, for it carried with it a touch of frost, but there was nothing disagreeable about it; on the contrary, it served to brace and stimulate like the flick of a whip or the light prick of a spur. The frost had brushed the face of the moors so that the bracken had turned rusty, with only a few smears of faded yellow here and there, and the heather was washed-out and inconspicuous. But when we reached the top of the glen and sat down on a rock with our backs to the wall, the beauty of the scene gripped us both. The very swamp, twenty feet below us, was painted in gorgeous colours, and the stunted trees that fringed it, and their sisters that screened the far-off edge of the hill, were cloaked in sunset tints and rich golden-browns that ravished the eye.

"It pays to come up here, Louis," said my master. "You get a better perspective and see things in truer proportion. I feel a different man already."

There was silence for another moment, and then he said:

"Have you ever asked yourself the meaning of all this, Louis?"

I knew what he meant, but I temporised. I had asked myself the meaning often enough, but the conclusion I had come to was not one I could explain to him.

"The meaning of the trouble of the last few years?" I queried.

"Yes; have you asked yourself what is the interpretation of the riddle?" The tone was quite cheerful, and Mr. Middleton's face had regained its colour.

"Well, the cause is obvious enough," I said. "It's the accumulation of stock and these long-date bill transactions of Blunts'. Otherwise there isn't much difference, is there? The new machinery at the Upper Mill and the alterations there, and also the introduction of the jacquards, have cost a good deal of money, too. Still, trade's good enough and we ought to pull round."

"All that is very interesting," was the grim reply; "but it isn't an answer to my question. I didn't ask you if you knew the cause, but if you had ever thought about the meaning of all this trouble?"

"You suggest there is some purpose in it?"

"If it has a meaning it has a purpose, of course," he said impatiently. "Why can't you say right out that you've never thought about it? I do mean to say there's some purpose in it, though I daresay you and everybody else would think my reading of it fantastical."

He hesitated a moment and then continued, with his eyes straight before him and his chin in the air:

"Six years ago last summer 'the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.' So far those are the words of Scripture, Louis, as no doubt you know, but the rest are the words of David Middleton. And the Lord said, 'What do you make of David Middleton? He's not without his faults,

but he does his best to serve Me.' And Satan said, 'Why shouldn't he? He's pretty well off. His father left him a good bit of money and he has a tidy business and no more worry than is good for him. He thinks he's serving his own interests by serving You. But let him lose his money, and You'll find a difference.' And the Lord said, 'I was rich once but I left my riches behind and trod the Winepress alone, and My grace is sufficient for David Middleton.' 'Is it?' said Satan; 'will You let me try him?' And the Lord said, 'Behold, all that he hath is in thy power.'"

Mr. Middleton leaned across and looked hard into my eyes. "Now call me a madman or a fool, Louis, but that's the meaning of this trouble."

I did not speak for a while, but as my master's eyes remained fixed upon my face as though he would defy my ridicule, I said at length:

"Adversity has its uses, of course, Mr. Middleton, and I suppose we may be braced by it as our bodies are by hard training and exercise, or by this keen wind. At any rate, I feel sure you would stand the test; though in many respects," I continued with a smile, "you wouldn't remind people of Job exactly."

"Perhaps I shouldn't," he replied, still grimly; "but I'll remind them of him in this respect, at any rate. If I lose every penny I have; if the earth opens and swallows my mills and warehouse; if every customer on my books goes smash; if Lowther and the rest of them sell the coat from my back and send me to sit upon the ashes in the workhouse yard, I'll face it like a man and a Christian. God has taken my wife, and he may try me by taking Mary too, but I'll not—turn—back—from—the—Way—of—the—Winepress so long as a spark of life is left in me."

I could not fail to be impressed by the man's earnestness. The grey pallor of his face had returned; the hands trembled a little as they lay outstretched upon his knees;

but the eyes blazed fiercely, and I turned my own away.

Was trouble driving my master mad? Had he brooded over this thought until it had become an obsession? In any case I felt that he ought to be soothed.

"It's good of you to speak your mind to me so freely," I said, "and I'm sure you would suffer any loss sooner than lose your integrity. But I don't think God always sends us our misfortunes, and I'm certain He expects us to do our best to get out of the ditches we fall into. That's why I want to get those pieces sold. And at any rate it hasn't come to ashes and the workhouse yet——"

He interrupted me. "Don't run away with the idea that I'm expecting to be ruined. It's ridiculous, so far as I can see; but then Job would have thought it ridiculous at one time, before the whirlwind came. All I say is if God tries me to the bitter end I'm going through with it. I read the sixty-third of Isaiah every night and have done for years; and if ever you want to know where I stand you can find out by reading the fifth verse."

Words altogether failed me, though thoughts struggled within me for expression. Then he continued, with brightening face and livelier tone:

"And there's another thing. I'm not going to cry about it, and I'm not going to walk about with a wry face. I won't give the devil so much pleasure. It goes against the grain, of course, to lose what one's got; and if I let you sell these pieces at your own price it's only because I'll see that my creditors are paid in full if I'm beggared myself; but the devil shan't have the laugh at me."

He slapped me on the back as I still said nothing, and continued with one of his short laughs:

"We'd better move on. You've often offered me this dish, Louis, and I don't like it yet: it's got a nasty taste with it. However, this walk has helped me to digest the

first spoonful, and to-morrow you shall go and stave off the workhouse whilst I write a few polite lines to Lowther."

Seth shook his head when I told him about it that night, and reaching out for the big Bible he turned to the verse Mr. Middleton had indicated. The last clause seized his imagination: "and my fury it upheld me."

He sat for several minutes with the book on his knee and his eyes fixed upon the hearth, and then said:

"I can't make much out on't, Louis, but there's summat i' t' sound o' t' words 'at smacks o' David. It's a poor sort o' thing to keep a man up, is fury—jt could easy make 'im run 'is head again' a wall. I'd sooner have faith up'old me nor temper; what say you, lass?"

Susan smiled. "'In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength,'" she said.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE STORM BURSTS

I SET to work at once the next day, but the workhouse grew appreciably nearer when the pieces were taken down from the stacks where they had lain for years; when they were opened out and examined. In hundreds of them mildew had done its deadly work, creeping unobserved into the very heart of the piles, making the goods rotten and almost worthless.

Worse than the ravages of the mildew was the destruction caused by moths. Thousands of pieces which to all outward appearance were perfect were almost eaten through by these terrible insects. As Tom opened out piece after piece and disclosed the extent of the damage my heart sank within me, for I recognised in these ruthless destroyers the modern counterpart of the Sabeans and Chaldeans of Job's story.

I had reckoned upon a loss of some ten thousand pounds; I knew now that we should be fortunate to escape at double that figure.

Mr. Middleton took the news calmly enough, and in the days that followed a good deal of his old sprightliness returned. He was more erect in his walk; his old laugh rang out more frequently, and his interest in the affairs of others, which had begun to leave him, became as keen as ever. The few business men who had believed the rumours that all was not quite right with D. & D. Middleton remarked the man's changed attitude and concluded that the difficulty, whatever it might have been, had been surmounted.

A different spirit began to pervade the warehouse. It was as though the storm that threatened a deluge had blown over and left the sky blue again, and the earth rejoicing in the sunshine.

The explanation he had given me, and the frequent conversations that now took place between us, gave me the clue to his frame of mind.

For six years he had had before his eyes the possibility of humiliation. His wife had known of it, and had sympathised, but, like him, she had not regarded ultimate ruin as a likely contingency. She had realised that there might be reverses and that the bank balance might be seriously reduced, but the prospect had not caused her the loss of a moment's sleep; for if such things had to be they must be of God's appointing, and she was therefore prepared to submit without murmuring. In the background of her thoughts there was always the picture of Job, blessed in his latter end more than in his beginning; and it was not difficult for her to face the anticipation of a little present discomfort which the future was to reward with increased prosperity.

Until he had spoken openly to me my master had never revealed his feelings to any other than his wife, because he was very sure that they would be misunderstood, if not ridiculed. His confession, therefore, had had the note of defiance in it; and, indifferent as he was to the opinions of others, he had been relieved to find that I had not apparently regarded him as insane. To have declared himself was in itself a relief; and the serenity which he immediately experienced arose, no doubt, from the knowledge that he had put another obstacle in the path of retreat.

In estimating the merit of his submission to what he considered the will of God it should be remembered that even yet financial ruin, absolute and irretrievable, was hardly to be thought of. As he had said to me, he was well able, if

figures counted for anything, to pay his creditors twenty shillings in the pound and still have a substantial surplus left. Many a man has had to stand where David Middleton stood without that comfortable assurance, and with the added anxiety of wife and children dependent upon him; for them there has been no horizon line of light beyond the storm-clouds.

But though that makes the burden immeasurably heavier, it may be doubted if the sense of humiliation is not always the bitterest ingredient in the cup which the man of honour and stainless reputation has to drink, whatever arrangement he may make with his creditors. To be pitied by the kindly and stared at coldly by the ill-disposed is an experience from which the best and humblest of men might well shrink; and when men are not humble, but proud, the humiliation must necessarily be extreme.

Mr. Middleton had been forced to realise that a combination of circumstances might force him to have to appeal to his creditors' generosity, and he could not close his eyes to the publicity and comment this would involve. That was bitterness enough; but the belief that this was a device of the devil to secure his downfall, and that God was looking on to see how he would stand the test, acted like iron in his blood. For it was thus that he had reconciled the apparent contradictions of the Bible. The Book certainly did say that "in her left hand were riches and honour," but it also showed that certain men were picked out for special distinction, that in them might be manifested the grace and power of God. Job had been one of these; what if he, David Middleton, should be another?

A sufficient number of pieces was sold during the remaining weeks of the month to satisfy the requirements of the bank, but the loss was tremendous. Tom Greening swore softly to himself at "the guv'nor's" stupidity, as stack after stack of pieces was lowered and passed at ruinous prices

into the hands of the "job and fent" dealer. I spared no effort to dispose of the stock to the best advantage, but I admit I came at times very near to despair. Only Mr. Middleton himself remained cheerful. "Go on; get 'em out," he said, with the inward satisfaction that he was foiling the devil; not realising that the only tempter who was responsible for this loss had been his own stupidity. "We've begun now; we'll make an end of them whilst we're at it."

It was more easily said than done, for purchasers fought shy of goods that were not only no longer in demand but were also in bad, and at best suspicious, condition; and in the end large numbers of pieces remained unsold.

One afternoon in November, whilst I was in Manchester, Mr. Middleton was sitting in his office when the cry of a newsboy was heard high above the din of traffic. "Heavy failure in Broadbeck. Immense li'bilities!"

The cry was repeated by another voice, and in the distance others were heard with the same hurried, strident note. From the way in which the cries were interrupted, renewed and interrupted again, it was evident that the papers were being rapidly bought. Mr. Middleton sent the office-boy for a copy, and on the very first page read the boldly-printed announcement that sent every drop of blood from his face and made the paper fall from his hands:

BLUNT, SHARPE & CO. SUSPEND PAYMENT.

LIABILITIES £700,000.

It was the eve of his own pay-day.

In a moment he recovered himself and rang the bell, but simultaneously Tillotson entered and came up to the desk. "This is a terrible business, Mr. Middleton," he said. "I'm awfully sorry, sir."

"So am I, Tillotson, and very much surprised. I

wouldn't have believed it of Blunt. However, that's between him and his conscience. You know what it means for us, of course?"

"I'm afraid I do. Mr. Lowther has just sent up to say he would like to see you at once. You know, of course, we ought to pay to-morrow?"

"Yes, I know. Lowther will have to wait. I'm going straight away to my solicitors, Tillotson."

He went, and so destroyed his last chance of stemming the flood. On the following afternoon the eager newsboys provided the public with a new thrill, and they again did good business. "'Nother Sensation in the Broadbeck Trade. Affairs of well-known Broadbeck Firm."

Mr. Middleton's humiliation was well launched—and it was Mary's twenty-first birthday.

Not all proverbs are true, but that which tells us that "ill news flies fast" is not often discredited. On this occasion, at any rate, it flew fast and straight to Brier Dene, and alighted in the unclean hands of Sam Lightfoot.

It was towards closing time and Sam was on his way from the Upper to the Valley Mill, and as he had to pass the Horse and Jockey he called in to anticipate his evening allowance. But the glass, though filled, was never raised to his lips. The landlord had just opened his evening paper, and his horrified exclamation brought Sam to his side. For a moment the man's eyes failed to serve his senses, though the type was bold:

AFFAIRS OF D. & D. MIDDLETON.

RESULT OF THE BLUNT-SHARPE SMASH.

MEETING OF CREDITORS CALLED FOR TO-MORROW.

With a volley of oaths pouring from his lips Sam left the house and raced along the lane to the mill.

The engine stopped as he reached it, and the hands began to pour out. "Stop, every one of you!" he shouted. "Don't let one go. Wait 'ere in t' yard till they're all out. I've got that to tell ye 'at'll mak' most on ye sick."

One or two of the women laughed and would have passed him, but he hurled himself upon them like a madman and defied them to move. He had lost his cap, and he now passed his hands through his hair and stamped about in his impatience for the last man to emerge.

There was no light save that which came faintly from the mill, and the scene was a weird one. The women huddled together in a crowd, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and this man who was, as they thought, wild with drink. By and bye some of the overlookers came out together and would have pushed Sam aside, but he seemed to have the strength of ten and he forced them back.

"Stay there, I tell ye!" he shouted, with the accompaniment of fearful oaths; "I've summat to say 'at ye'll none o' ye want to miss. Curse it, won't someb'dy go into t' mill an' fetch Joss an' t' rest on 'em out?"

"What's this foolery about?" said a voice from the doorway. Joss had appeared, and at the same moment the lights in the mill were extinguished. "What devil's trick are you trying on now? If ye don't take yerself off 'ome I'll take ye by t' scruft o' t' neck an' chuck ye in t' beck."

Joss was a powerful man, and he moved threateningly towards Sam, who took no notice of his approach. Above them the wind whistled in the trees; and below, the beck splashed and gurgled towards the bridge.

"Listen, all of ye," shouted the infuriated man; "I've got that to say to ye 'at'll mak' ye want nowt to eat this tea-time. It'll tak' yer appetites, I'll warrant. Joss talks about devil's tricks, an' it's about devil's tricks I'm goin' to tell ye. Most of ye's ruined. Do ye 'ear me, you lot at t' back yonder?" And he raised his voice and shrieked

out the words in his frenzy. "I say most of ye's lost every penny o' yer savin's; an' the devil 'at's done it is David Middleton—him! Do ye 'ear me? I say the cantin' old hypocrite, David Middleton, 'as ruined t' lot on us!"

Joss strode forward, and seizing him by the collar of his coat shook him fiercely; but the man had superhuman strength and he freed himself. He leaped upon a pile of stones by the roadside and turned to the crowd again—to the crowd that was awed and apprehensive of evil, but that did not understand—and roared:

"Wait while ye get yer papers an' then ye'll see. David Middleton's called 'is creditors together; an' I wish hell 'ad 'im; an' all our savin's is gone. May God——"

His words were lost in the loud wail that rose from the women in front of him. They did not stop to reason: they did not wait for confirmation. All they felt was the weight of the sudden blow; and the blackness around them was not so dense as the blackness of their despair.

Then as the storm lulled a little the voice of Sam was heard again in frightful imprecation, and Joss flung himself upon him and forced the man's own coat over his mouth; and the wailing began afresh.

Suddenly a clear, calm voice began to sing a hymn, and every word sounded sharp, distinct, and sweet above the turmoil. It was one they all knew, and the words fell like oil on troubled waters.

Sam struggled vainly in Joss's hands. "If ye don't hold your din I'll throttle ye," said the latter fiercely. "An' so I would ha' done for two pins," he declared to me later.

The sweet notes continued to ring out, and they spoke of confidence and safety amid "the storm of life."

"It's Liz Nelson!" whispered 'Tilda to Bella, who replied, "Aye, an' 'er an' 'er mother has put every penny in."

So far Lizzie had sung alone, but before the first line of

the third verse had been completed other voices joined in, and strengthened the appeal for support and comfort.

The hymn was a prayer and it brought a quick response. Women dried their tears, and felt that light had arisen in the darkness; and there were few who refrained from joining in the last verse.

When they had finished they went quietly to their respective homes, with a weight upon their spirits, it is true, but not wholly crushed; and Sam Lightfoot, baffled once more, was perhaps the only one who cursed David Middleton that night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SAM LIGHTFOOT PLOTS REVENGE

IN the days that immediately followed I am afraid I cut no very heroic figure. I was young, and the suddenness and completeness of the catastrophe overwhelmed me. My imagination ran riot as I pictured the straits to which Mr. Middleton and his niece might be reduced, and my own helplessness. I was like one who stands upon the beach with fettered feet and sees those he loves submerged and drowned before his eyes.

I was recovering myself a little when Mary came across to the Upper Mill one afternoon to question me.

I see her now as she entered the office, hatless, for the Mill House was only a few strides away, and with no visible marks of depression or grief, unless a deeper tenderness in her eyes could be so construed.

She smiled as I jumped off my stool and dusted the only chair with my "brat." "I've come to ask you to tell me all about it again," she said.

To be honest, I don't know what I said during the next few minutes. When I came to think it over later I could not avoid the conclusion that I must have made an ass of myself, for when I returned to consciousness I found her breathing words of encouragement and trust in a low, sweet voice with that indefinable quality of motherliness in it that is inherent in every true woman. I gave myself an internal shake and became a man again.

"You see, Uncle David leans on you," she was saying;

"though perhaps 'leans' isn't quite the right word, because he isn't one of the leaning kind, is he? Still, it helps him a great deal to know that you are so loyal and reliable: and he trusts you thoroughly. That is why I——"

"Miss Everard," I broke in, "please don't say any more. Now and again, when I think of what this may mean for—your uncle, it gets on top of me; but I'm all right now."

She looked down, for my eyes said more than the censorship of my lips permitted, as she replied:

"Well, you won't worry about me, will you? We are really very happy, uncle and I, and if only everybody can be paid in full neither of us will mind at all. Uncle says they will, but he is always sanguine, and I want you to promise that you will not keep anything from me."

I gave the promise, without hesitation or misgiving, for I knew instinctively that she was one of those who can bend their backs to the burden; and we talked together earnestly for quite a long time.

"There is another thing I want you to promise," she said just before she left; and there was an almost roguish look in her eyes. "Give me your word that you won't worry about uncle—or me; because, you see, there's nothing to worry about, really. I believe uncle will be disappointed now if he doesn't lose his money—you see, he's told me all about Job and the Winepress and everything. There's no sense in it, of course, but I couldn't tell him so, could I? and it really is making him absurdly cheerful. And as for me—well, you know that I can dust, don't you? and I'm not afraid of being poor."

She said the same to Seth and Susan.

"The dear lamb sat on the rug as she used to do when she were little," said Susan, whose voice was tremulous, "an' wanted to make us believe 'at she could be as 'appy in our little cottage as what she ever was at t' Mill 'Ouse. An'

she's got a thousan' pounds of 'er own, bless her! 'at she's goin' to pay to t' workpeople if her uncle'll let 'er. But I trust the good Lord won't let it come to that; I do, for sure."

"Now cheer up, lass!" said Seth encouragingly. "David isn't through t' loom yet, an' t' warp gives a bit o' trouble; but Him 'at's put 'im there knows what t' design is, an' it'll turn out all right, ye'll see. He's awk'ard to weave, is David, but he's good stuff, an' he'll none be put among t' jobs."

In spite of his high spirits there is no doubt that Mr. Middleton felt keenly the ordeal of the first meeting of creditors, but it was his own fault that a satisfactory arrangement was not arrived at. Mr. Lowther, feeling that he had good cause for resentment at the way he had been treated, and being disgusted with the wrong-headedness of the man, was disposed to be hostile; but all the others were distinctly sympathetic at the outset, and an exhibition of reasonableness on Mr. Middleton's part would have made them more so.

For two facts stood out clearly: first, that he had been overthrown by Blunts' downfall, and but for that financial avalanche would have held his ground; and secondly, that even now, and without being too sanguine as to the realisation of Blunts' estate, the firm could hardly be said to be insolvent.

Unfortunately Mr. Middleton chose to adopt the attitude of the injured man sustained by the strong sense of his own rectitude; and this had a galling effect upon all present and led some of them to suggest measures they would not otherwise have dreamed of, and which were not meant to be taken too seriously.

When a number of hard-headed business men meet together to face and discuss a possible loss of money it is reasonable to expect some criticism of the debtor's policy

and procedure; but what is to be done when the debtor regards himself as above criticism, and every critic as a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him? Before the meeting ended even his truest friends and those who understood him best had lost patience.

But the factor of self-interest counts for much, and even Mr. Lowther had to admit that nothing was to be gained by harshness and precipitancy. Accountants were appointed to examine the books, and a couple of members nominated to check the value of the stock and effects; and meantime facilities were to be given for the business to go forward under the old management. It was significant that not one of those present expressed the slightest doubt of the man's uprightness; and the greater part of the cloud would have been lifted at that meeting if his own manner had been conciliatory. As it was it was deemed best to inform him with coolness that no final conclusion had been reached, and that other meetings would be held as occasion might require. They told me that his face went very white and his chin very high; and that he merely nodded an acknowledgment.

From Broadbeck he went down to Brier Dene and addressed the workpeople of each mill, making no secret of anything. "I'm the only man who is going to lose money," he said; "unless this committee they've appointed go wrong in their heads, in which case I'm not responsible. You can't have your money just now, and I'm sorry; but whatever happens to anybody else I give you my word that not one of you shall lose a penny in the long run; so you've no need to worry about it."

A few may realise what it cost a man of Mr. Middleton's temperament to stand before his workpeople in the position of a suitor for their forbearance; it was wormwood to his pride, for in all his dealings with them since his earliest connection with the firm he had installed himself as a kind of

patron saint; and to be cast down from his niche with little hope of ever regaining it was the bitterest ingredient in the cup of his humiliation. Had he been less sincere the draught would have been less noxious; but he had always done his best for his employés and he had both coveted and cherished their esteem. He was sincere now when he promised them payment in full, and it was quite characteristic of him that he expected the assurance to restore their entire confidence.

In some cases it did. Lizzie Nelson was quite satisfied. She was by far the largest depositor, for all her mother's savings were included in the five hundred odd pounds which she had placed in the "bank"; and after Mr. Middleton had spoken she gave the matter no further troubled thought.

Not so Sam Lightfoot, whose deposit was half as large. He listened with a frown upon his brow and a curse upon his tongue. "Lies and bluff!" he was heard to mutter; "I promised I'd be even wi' ye yet, David Middleton, an' now yer time's come. Ye shall rot for this, or I'm a liar!"

From that moment Sam busied himself with schemes for his master's injury; and in intent, serious and well-considered, he became a murderer. The grievance of six years before still rankled in his breast. With perverse blindness he persisted in attributing his father's death to Mr. Middleton's vindictiveness; and the determination to be revenged never left him. But until this new development his wrath had slumbered, and he had dreamed of vengeance rather than plotted it; now it awoke to feverish activity. I had the narrative from his own lips, though not until some years had passed away and the shadow of death was deep upon him.

For a time the Horse and Jockey saw him no more. He realised the need of a clear brain, and he abstained almost entirely from strong drink and was hardly conscious of his

abstinence, for another indulgence had gripped him: he thirsted no longer for beer, but for blood.

With the skill and caution of the poacher he tracked Mr. Middleton's steps whenever he left the house in the dark. After a hurried tea he would return to the neighbourhood of the Upper Mill and watch the Mill House with more than a detective's zeal. When he had done this for nearly a week he discovered that his master left the house every night at half-past nine and returned an hour later; also that he invariably went the same round and returned by the footbridge, a few yards below his door, on the stroke of half-past ten. Once satisfied on this point Sam proceeded to lay his trap, and fortune seemed to favour him.

It was November, and the nights were dark and typically depressing. Few people crossed the footbridge at any time except a small number who worked at the Upper Mill; and after closing time it was rarely used, for the woods were gruesome in winter and had no attractions for the villagers.

Very beautiful was the situation of the mill as one looked down upon it from the yellow hillside in spring and summer; ten times more beautiful in autumn, when the foliage in which it was embedded was ablaze with the gorgeous raiment in which it decked itself for sepulture. On the little level space between the foot of the hill and the rising wood on the other side, the mill squatted comfortably and the Mill House faced it. The Mill House was unpretentious and had nothing picturesque about it; but when in the days of water-power the stream spread out behind it into a miniature lake, and rushed into the "race" at the side, it had an attractiveness that made its own appeal.

The road between the mill and the house wound to the footbridge that crossed the brook and gave access to the woods. It was a poor little bridge, with one flimsy hand-rail, and footboards half rotten and insecure; so that only

the familiarity that breeds contempt of danger enabled those who made use of it to cross without trepidation.

Some eight feet or more below, the brook murmured placidly in summer-time, as it hurried along, washing the boulders and smaller stones that lay in its bed, and the banks that rose steeply on either side. Very charming was the scene during six months of the year, for tall grasses and gay flowers grew upon the tiny islets, and the banks were hidden by bush and brake; whilst the boughs of great trees spread themselves overhead, offering delightful shade.

But in winter the murmur was often changed to roaring as the waters hurled themselves down the valley; and the bushes were sullen and the trees bare, as the wind soughed or wailed among them. Damp oozed from the black trunks and moisture dripped from the overhanging boughs, and the dead leaves upon the path soaked it up and retained it to be pressed out by the foot of the pedestrian. And the mill and the Mill House stood out dingy against the general dinginess, and depression seemed to hold undisputed sway all round; for summer is a fairy and a touch of her wand makes fairyland; but winter is a demon and his touch brings blight.

Darkness and discomfort, however, were as nothing to David Middleton just now. What was the darkness outside to that within? What was the discomfort of the body to that of the soul? Mr. Middleton was strong to suffer, but he felt the pain of it, as Job did when he sat upon the ashes and scraped himself with the potsherd. The sneers of those he passed in the street—those who scoffed at his religion and rejoiced in his downfall; the patronage of those whom he had patronised; the pity of those whom he had condemned; the condolence of his friends, some of whom he had made to smart—this was his daily portion now, immensely magnified by natural sensitiveness; and he swallowed it courageously but with loathing.

Added to all this was the uncertainty of his position. Would God call him to face the still blacker abyss of bankruptcy, or would His angel call out of heaven for Satan's hand to be stayed? He could not rest in the house, and sleep could be secured only by a brisk walk before he went to bed.

Mary? Yes, Mary was a comforter, but he instinctively felt that much as she loved him she did not understand, and so could not sympathise; and he felt that I, too, did not believe that this trouble was from God. His helpmeet would have understood, but she had been taken from him. He was alone: it was all part of the great trial of his faith —he was treading the Winepress *alone*.

A week had gone by since the meeting of his creditors, but increasing familiarity with the situation had brought him no relief. Mary looked up anxiously as he pushed back his chair from the supper-table and went out into the little hall. "Don't go, uncle dear," she said. "It's awfully dark and . . . and weird to-night. Stay in and talk to me."

Mr. Middleton strove to be cheerful. He put his arm round her and kissed her. "The darkness won't hurt me," he said with a forced laugh. "It does me good, Moll, to have a run round. Don't trouble about me; I shall be back in an hour."

He took up his hat and stick and passed out into the darkness, and a gleam of satisfaction came into the wild eyes of the man who was crouching behind the hedge in the gloom of the night. They watched the black form climb the hillside; watched it until it disappeared beyond the girdle of trees on the top and then fell. The man to whom they belonged then crept cautiously down to the brook and hid himself in the brushwood behind the giant beech.

An hour passes quickly for the man who is fighting his doubts and thrashing his fears! Mr. Middleton had

crossed the stream higher up the valley; traversed the wood to its end; climbed the rough lane that led to the Prospect; skirted the hill and followed the equally rough road that wound down to Norrside, and was now on his way back through the wood from the opposite end.

The day had been damp and cold, but with the evening there had come a rise of temperature, and now thin mists were curling from the ground here and there, and disappearing into the darkness, like fantastic ghosts wrapped in diaphanous winding-sheets. Mr. Middleton saw nothing of them, for his thoughts were otherwhere. The water oozed from the leaves beneath his feet; it dripped, dripped upon him from every tree as he passed along, but he was not conscious of it. Some sentinel awake within the slumbering citadel of his senses warned him of obstructions in his path—here the stump of a broken sapling, there an accumulation of slippery stones imbedded in the soil—and he mechanically avoided them, and so reached the steep and shaly bank that sloped to the bridge.

Time drags for the man who has nothing to do but wait and look forward to its end! Every minute duplicates itself; the slow quarters stretch into hours and the hour becomes an æon. Sam Lightfoot, standing on the farther side of the great beech where the darkness was densest, and hiding in one of its hollows, cursed the laggard moments in unspoken words. At his feet the waters fretted against the stones; Sam cursed them because they were not in flood. He cursed the mist, fearing that it might rob him of the sight he longed for, and lest it should make his victim slow and cautious. He looked at his watch; one quarter gone —only one, and he was stiff with standing so still: so unnecessarily still, for who was near to discover him; or who, being near, would ever dream of his presence there? The half-hour; and somewhere not far away the sound of a man whistling for his dog. Would he come this way?

Curse him if he should! But no; it was doubtless some lad on his way to the cottages above the mill. The third quarter; would the dreary watch never end? Would the moment of vengeance never arrive? The perspiration gathered upon his brow: his heart beat riotously, but repentance found no place there; only the exultation of the hour appointed. He strained his eyes into the darkness, emerged a little with stealthiest footsteps, so that he could see the bridge and yet be himself unseen.

Ten minutes more, and now he heard a sound from the other side—a man's voice uttering an exclamation as he stumbled down the slippery bank some fifty feet away. Sam, peering round the tree, could make out a tall form as it stepped upon the bridge. The hour had arrived and the man.

There was a sharp cry as a rotten board gave way beneath the man's weight; a wild clutch at the handrail that broke beneath his grasp; a dull thud; a splash, and then another cry, not of alarm this time, but of agony; and Sam Lightfoot left the shelter of the tree and crept swiftly but silently under cover of the hedge into the darkness of the fields.

CHAPTER XXIX

VICTORIA BECOMES ASSISTANT NURSE

MR. MIDDLETON heard the cry as he came down the bank, and was sure that an accident of some kind had happened and that it was at or near the bridge. He therefore ran along the path with every sense alert, and shouted as he ran.

It was very dark, but when he came to the bridge he was able to see that the handrail was gone, though he could not at a glance determine the full extent of the damage; nor did he wait to do so, for the sound of groaning came up from the rushing waters, and with the groaning a warning voice:

"Don't cross—don't cross! Hang it, man, the bridge is down—I tell you the rotten thing is done for, and so am I."

"Is that you, Truman?" shouted Mr. Middleton; "I'll be with you in a moment." And he clambered down the bank, and splashing into the stream made his way to the injured man.

He was wedged between two rocks of no great size, with the water well above his waist, and was manifestly in some pain. "It's my back!" he groaned; "by all the gods, it must be broken—I tell you, Middleton, it must."

"I hope not," said the other. "Let me see if I can get you to the side and then I'll run for help. Now let me put my hands under your arms and raise you a trifle." The yell that followed, however, caused him to desist.

"Oh, my back, my back!" groaned Truman. "Good

Lord! Middleton, I am greatly obliged to you, but I would rather drown—I say let me die."

"Not yet awhile, anyhow," responded Mr. Middleton, "but I can see I shall have to get help. You've evidently hurt your back badly. Can you move your legs?"

"No use in 'em at all; man, I can't stir 'em."

At that moment there came a voice from the other side. Mary had heard the last cry of pain and had hurried in the direction from which it had seemed to come. When she realised the situation she ran back to the house to tell Marshall to ride as hard as he could to Norrside for the doctor, and herself hastened up the lane to Keeper's Cottages for help.

Marshall stopped to give me the news as he passed, and when I reached the spot Mr. Truman was still in the water, but Keeper Rufus and several other men had waded in and were struggling to remove the rocks.

Women were there, too, holding lamps and lanterns of various kinds, and one or two of them had ventured cautiously on to the broken bridge, whilst the others stood upon the bank and shielded their lamps with their skirts. "Eh, poor fellow," they whispered to each other, "but he does look deathly, for sure."

It was a weird scene—the swollen stream raging down the dark gully, and the tall trees waving their black branches overhead and around, with the yellow light from the lamps flickering fitfully upon the dark waters and the silhouetted group of men who stood knee-deep in the stream about the injured man.

The rocks were shifted at last, but it was no easy task to lift the helpless man on to the door which had been brought from the bank and which a couple of men were holding as horizontally as possible, with one end resting on a boulder. Mr. Middleton put his arms quite round Truman's body and low down his back; two other men took his legs, and a

fourth his head, but though the poor fellow clenched his teeth in an attempt to keep it back, he could not prevent the sharp cry that escaped him when the effort was made.

When their load had been laid upon the hearthrug before the kitchen fire at the Mill House some of the men returned to block the bridge, and Mary gave her patient hot coffee.

"We can do nothing more until the doctor comes," she said. "You had all better go and get into dry clothes."

Rufus accommodated me, and I was back at the Mill House when the doctor arrived. After he had examined his patient and grunted a little he looked round: "Where are you going to put him?" he asked.

"I've had a fire made in the guest-room," said Mary, "and the bed is aired."

"He'll need a water-bed," the doctor replied, "but that can be seen to to-morrow. We shall have to make shift as well as we can to-night."

"Now hang it all, doctor," interposed Mr. Truman; "you may address your remarks to me. I've not resigned office yet. I've still got a voice in my own government, and I'm going to be consulted. I won't be treated as if I were a corpse . . . I will NOT."

The doctor turned to him. "I wouldn't excite myself if I were you. Talking won't do you much harm, perhaps, but there are limits, you know. Now I'll tell you what's happened. You've sustained a simple fracture of the lower part of the spine. I think there's no doubt of that; and to be quite candid it's a serious matter."

"I see," said Mr. Truman calmly; "and if I'm put to bed here how long will this simple fracture keep me on my back? Hang it, man, you needn't pull such a face over it. . . . I say there's nothing lost by being cheerful. I quite realise I have broken my back . . . now out with it."

"Well," replied the doctor, "we shall not get you out of bed under three months, at any rate,"

Mr. Truman glared at him. "And you coolly suggest, confound you, that I inflict myself on these good people for three months! I like your impudence . . . I say I . . ."

"There's no impudence in it," said Mr. Middleton. "Here you are and here you're going to stop. You're my guest, willy-nilly, Truman, and I'm only too thankful that my house was so handy. Now please say no more about it."

"Of course Mr. Truman will remain," said Mary, "and I will nurse him."

The doctor shook his head. "No, you won't," he said. "He has certainly a better chance here, for it's a rough road and a long way to his own home; but he will need an experienced nurse."

"I am much obliged to you," said Mr. Truman, with his eyes upon Mary; "I am greatly obliged to you. And now, doctor, fill up the cup. Hang it, man, tell me the truth. Is this business fatal—a matter of hours or days? I'm not a child . . . you needn't feed me with a spoon."

"Well," said the doctor after a short pause, "I daresay it's best to be frank with you. It's too early yet to speak positively, for cases of this kind are not cut and dried, but I see no reason why we shouldn't pull you through unless complications set in. It's a mercy you haven't injured your head at all, so you won't feel very much pain, considering the serious nature of the injury. Still, I ought to tell you that you've permanently lost the use of your lower parts—in fact, the long and short of it is you're paralysed."

He paused again and looked down at his patient, whose eyes had remained calmly fixed upon him. "Go on," said Mr. Truman; "it's all perfectly plain so far."

The doctor cleared his throat. "If all goes well, when you leave your bed we shall get you out pretty often in a spinal cart, and later in a bath-chair."

"Does it end there?" inquired the other grimly; "no hope of crutches or anything of the sort?"

The doctor shook his head. "I have known patients who have been able to manage a self-propelling chair in course of time," he replied.

The tears gathered in Mary's eyes and her uncle's grew moist; but the man upon the hearth appeared to be thinking.

"Then it comes to this," he said at length; "I'm injured, but perhaps not fatally: maimed for life, but with some prospect of partial recovery? I say it comes to that?"

"Well, yes, partial recovery," said the doctor, emphasising the adjective.

"All right," said Mr. Truman with a faint smile; "then we'll begin life again on that basis . . . I say we'll start on the fresh tack. Miss Everard, believe me, I'm very sorry to cause you so much trouble."

He was put to bed and an experienced nurse came the next day. Then three days later Victoria appeared. "I've made all my calculations, dear," she said to Mary. "I haven't arrived at a decision without careful thought; but I've come to stay, if you'll let me."

"Do you mean you've thrown up your work?" said Mary.

"Just that," replied Victoria. "I discussed the matter with my chief and he agreed that Mr. Truman had the first claim upon me, and that I should be only doing my duty by coming at once; and we've arranged matters so that I shan't actually starve. I'm going to do Mr. Truman's work for him."

The light came into the sick man's eyes when he saw her, though he professed to be highly indignant at her folly. "Deuce take it, girl," he said. "Why should you play the fool? But women are creatures of impulse . . . I tell you they are. You can't reason with them . . . hang it all, it's a waste of breath."

Victoria smiled. "Now listen to me, sir," she replied. "I have been under your authority; now you are to be under mine. I am to command and you are to obey; and you shall find that woman can be firm as well as gentle."

"Confound it, girl," said the man with a show of exasperation; "I tell you I will obey none of you . . . I will NOT. And yet it's a pleasure to see you, Vic, and to know that I needn't restrain myself in your company. Hang it! my teeth have made my tongue sore with holding back my words in that child's presence."

"Then the child will excoriate it with hot drink," said Mary, as she put down the tray on the table at his side. "I suppose you'll say that 'excoriate' isn't the right word; but, seriously, you needn't do yourself any injury for my sake, Mr. Truman. I rather like your curious expressions."

"It's a bad habit, child," he said tenderly; "I ought not to do it. And yet my oaths, like many good men's prayers, go no farther than the ceiling, I am sure. But I will curb myself."

He followed her with his eyes as she left the room. "A veritable Sister of Mercy," he murmured. "God bless that child, Vic."

"She is a dear girl," said Victoria. "We are the best of friends. I got to know her well in the autumn."

Mr. Truman looked at her fixedly without speaking. "I have told you before, girl, that you would go down to hell," he said at length.

He was restless one night when the nurse was asleep and Victoria was on duty. The lamp was turned down and shaded, but the red glow from the fire illuminated the room.

"Vic," he said, "draw your chair up to the bed. I want to speak to you."

The girl obeyed. "We're not likely to be overheard, are we?" he asked.

"Oh no," she replied. "It's two o'clock in the morning."

"Swear to me," he said, "that you will never repeat to any living soul what I am going to tell you."

"If you can't trust me don't tell me," said Victoria. "If you think what you have to say oughtn't to be told, that is sufficient to seal my lips."

He looked hard at her. "I trust you absolutely," he said.

For a moment or two he said nothing, but chuckled quietly at some thought. "Do you know, Vic," he began at last, "our good friend, Middleton, is quite convinced, I can see, that I have been sent here for a purpose. I am the poor beggar who was wounded, and he is the Good Samaritan who is to pour in oil and wine; and he loses no opportunity of dabbing on a plaster of his peculiar theology."

Again he was silent, and smiled to himself; but in another moment he turned his eyes upon the girl.

"Now tell me, Vic, what do you know of this accident of mine? What have they told you?"

"That the bridge was rotten and gave way beneath you, and you fell backwards into the stream and broke your back upon a boulder."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"And you have never heard any suggestion of foul play?"

"Of foul play? No. Do you mean that this had been planned beforehand?"

"I suspect it, that is all. I tell you I strongly suspect it."

"But why? Surely the boards were rotten? It is a shame that they had not been attended to."

"Vic, I passed over the bridge that afternoon, and though the boards were rotten they were not loose, and the handrail was secure. It had been tampered with. . . . I tell you I know it had."

"But who could have done it? What grudge has anyone against you? I don't understand."

"None. I tell you, none. I haven't an enemy. It was a trap prepared for David Middleton."

"For Mr. Middleton? Oh, Mr. Truman, are you sure? But who would do it?"

"I tell you, girl, I suspect it . . . and yet, deuce take it, I am sure of it. He was just behind me. He used to cross the bridge at that hour every night; and most damning proof of all——"

"Yes?"

"A man was watching behind the beech-tree, and that man was not among those who came to my assistance."

"Oh, Mr. Truman! You saw him, then?"

"I saw him; only the briefest glance as I shouted and fell. It was very dark, but I saw the shape of his head and shoulders as he leaned eagerly forward when I cried. Girl, my eyes are sharp and I saw the man. . . . I tell you I am never mistaken."

"And you recognised him?"

"What was the name of the poaching fellow our friend Middleton put in prison?"

"Sam Lightfoot? Mr. Truman!"

"It was Sam Lightfoot. . . . Hang it, Vic, I tell you it was no other."

Victoria buried her face in her hands and groaned. "He shall pay for this," she said fiercely.

"No doubt he will," returned Mr. Truman; "but you and I won't exact payment, Vic."

"But you don't mean to say you are going to keep this to yourself? You don't tell me that he's not to be punished?"

"Vic, I tell you nothing of the sort. He cannot escape punishment, but I shall not punish him. . . . I will NOT. But there is one other whom I shall tell."

"Mr. Middleton?"

"By all the gods, no! Has not the man enough to carry? Cannot I bear this burden for him? I tell you he must never know."

"Then whom will you tell? Mary? Louis?"

"I shall tell Sam Lightfoot. Girl, when I am well enough I will tell him that I forgive him."

Victoria burst into angry tears. "You have no right to let him escape," she said. "If it's true, his guilt ought to be brought home to him and the law should punish him. You are crippled for life—you who were so strong and active. You are made dependent upon others for everything you require. I can't bear it. He shall not escape."

"You promised me, Victoria. Hang it, girl, I do not distrust you."

"Oh, it's too bad," sobbed Victoria, quietly but passionately; "I ought not to have promised. I'm an accessory after the fact, and I shall share his guilt."

"He is my debtor," said the other; "girl, I tell you the debt is mine, and I freely forgive him all."

CHAPTER XXX

MR. MIDDLETON REFUSES THE DEVIL'S MONEY

A MANUFACTURING village, however small and pleasantly situated, and however remote from the throbbing centres of activity, can scarcely be designated "sleepy," and Brier Dene in ordinary times was no place for people of dormouse propensities. On the other hand its excitements were of a very tranquil order, centring around the domestic differences of certain ill-assorted couples for the most part, or the rumoured exploits of Sam Lightfoot and his fraternity; so that when tragedy on a first-class scale made its appearance the villagers hardly knew what to make of it.

The misfortune that had befallen Mr. Truman set every tongue wagging; but the sympathy that was expressed was not very deep, though it was genuine enough in its way. There was always the lurking belief that Providence keeps a detective's eye on suspicious characters and does not put them into a house of detention for nothing. It was well, therefore, to temper charity with caution in this instance, lest a man should find himself ranged in his sympathies against "Them above."

It was different in Mr. Middleton's case, for here nine-tenths of the inhabitants were involved in the trouble, and it was beyond belief that Providence could seek to indict an entire community. Moreover, everybody knew Mr. Middleton and what manner of man he was—a chapel-goer all his life, an abstainer and non-smoker, a pattern of the

virtues, and a patron of all that was good. It was no doubt true that in regard to his creed he was (to use an expression familiar in the village) "as narrow as a hen between the eyes," and that he had an awkward temper on occasion; but who had ever seen a man without imperfections? Indeed, who would like to live with one? The blow that had fallen upon the mill-owner stunned his employes, who could not bring themselves to realise that it might mean bankruptcy for their master and the loss of money and employment for them. They therefore waited, wondering without overmuch anxiety what the issue might be.

Mr. Middleton's demeanour during these dark November days helped to steady them, for he passed through the village with a cheery word for all who greeted him, and a high and semi-defiant head. I could not help admiring the spirit he showed, though I was permitted to see below the surface, and I knew that there were hours when he sat in his office like a man who dreamed, and whose dreams were dismal, and who when he roused himself shook off despair and girded himself with the resolution, "Yea, though He slay me yet will I trust in Him."

I say that I admired him, yet as the days went by he drove me almost wild with his tactless and provocative attitude towards his creditors, and his apparent determination to refuse any help from the outside. He was like a shipwrecked man who shuts his eyes to floating spars and lifebuoys and will either swim to safety unaided or drown.

Blunts' affairs were turning out badly. An offer had been made, and was likely to be accepted, of three and fourpence in the pound, and Mr. Middleton's creditors began to face the prospect of loss, and with the changed outlook there came a changed attitude. At a time like that what one has to fear is panic, and Mr. Lowther now sat in the seat of Pan and was in the mood for mischief. I do not blame him. He had been treated very curtly by the

debtor and had a good deal to put up with even yet, and there are limits to a bank manager's patience. He began to speak strongly of bankruptcy proceedings—more strongly, I fancy, than he would have done if he had not felt sure that the suggestion would be scouted—and the Committee began to get accustomed to the idea. The sword was above Mr. Middleton's head and it was his own fault that the cord that held it grew more slender every day.

He realised it well enough, but he was not really disquieted—at any rate not for long. I must have pulled a long face, for he was always rallying me, and at the close of one meeting when he had been more than usually overbearing he said:

"Look here, my boy, you think I'm a fool, but God won't allow my creditors or my workpeople to lose any money through David Middleton." And when I remained silent he put his hand on my arm and continued:

"It was at the last moment that God saved Isaac, and you'll see there'll be a ram in the thicket for me. Don't you worry, Louis."

That was all very well, but how could I help worrying when I saw this foolhardy swimmer turn aside from every raft and float, and breast the waves that threatened to engulf him.

I shall never forget how Mary came to me at the Upper Mill one afternoon with the sound of joy-bells in her voice and an indescribable light in her eyes that seemed to make the whole face radiant.

"The workpeople are saved!" she said exultingly as she entered the office. "I can't keep it to myself another moment. If I don't tell somebody I shall burst."

She composed herself sufficiently to explain that relief had come from an unexpected quarter. She had another uncle of whom I had never heard—her father's younger brother, who had married a wife who had inherited a

brewer's fortune. From the point of view of the Middletons this was a misfortune, and although Mary had not been absolutely forbidden to visit her wealthy relatives yet intercourse was discouraged and they had grown apart, so that Uncle Alfred and his wife had become little more than names.

They had seen in the paper, however, some news of Mr. Middleton's difficulties, and had written to Mary for further particulars; and as the matter of the workpeople's savings loomed most large in Mary's eyes at this time she had, I imagine, given it special prominence in her reply. The answer had come in the shape of a draft for a thousand pounds made out to the order of Mary Everard, with a graciously worded undertaking to make up any balance that might be required. Mary had concealed the full extent of the indebtedness because she was quite determined to expend her own small fortune, and her gratitude and delight at this relief was almost childlike.

"I'm sure it's an answer to prayer," she said; "though I'm afraid I hadn't much faith. I'm simply dying for uncle to come home. Won't he be glad?"

I had my doubts, but I did not share them with her, and after a while she went, bestowing on me as she closed the door a friendly smile that seemed to say we were mutually possessed of a joyful secret that was to be a day-star of hope for her uncle and many others. Poor girl! She came to see me a few hours later, when I was sitting with mother, and tears filled the eyes which had sparkled so brightly in the afternoon.

"Uncle is hopeless," she said, as she took the chair mother drew forward. "I hope it isn't disloyal, but I must speak to somebody. I really had begun to believe in answers to prayer, but it seems I'm all wrong again."

It came out by degrees: how annoyed Mr. Middleton had been that her uncle should have pryed into his affairs; how

grieved that Mary should have humiliated herself and him by begging (as he called it) for help; how impossible for him to accept relief from such a source—"brewers' shares"—did she think he would let the devil's money pay his debts? how he had softened in the end and explained that it was just a subtle temptation which God had given him power to recognise and resist.

I lost all patience as I listened, and Mary's distress no doubt contributed to my vexation, but what could I do? Mother saw nothing unusual in such madness; in her experience men were all aggravating. "Men's heads is as full o' maggots as old lofts is full o' rats," she said; "an' we've got to take what the Lord sends us."

"What are you going to do?" I asked Mary, and she replied:

"I'm sending it back. What else can I do? Isn't life a muddle?"

Friendly as Mary was with Mr. Truman, she had not said a word to him about her good fortune; but Mr. Middleton told him what had happened the same evening, and Victoria, who heard what followed, was much impressed. Mr. Middleton had got into the way of spending the after-supper hour with his guest at Mr. Truman's own request, and little by little he had opened his heart to him. Sometimes he got no reply, or a very few words of understanding or sympathy, but at other times the sick man's eyes would flash and a volley of caustic, ironical utterances would pour from his lips in quite his old-time manner.

On this occasion Mr. Middleton had dwelt so long upon his renunciation that he had reached the stage when satisfaction is not far removed from vainglory.

"I could do no other, Truman. I've no use for money that's got out of drink. I wouldn't touch the dirty stuff with the tongs. I couldn't take the devil's coin even to pay back my workpeople."

"Why not?" said Mr. Truman. "I thought there was Scriptural precedent for spoiling the Egyptians."

Mr. Middleton scowled at him. "That means, I suppose, that you would have taken the money! Well, I'm sorry to hear it. I wouldn't, and I suppose you'll call me a fool, but you can call me what you like. I'm thick-skinned."

"Yes," replied Mr. Truman, "I know you are thick-skinned. You might as well try to remove a camel's hump with a corn-plaster as a bigot's prejudices with reason; the one is as feasible as the other."

"All this doesn't tell me what you would have done if you had got this devil's-money," said the other drily.

Mr. Truman was silent for a time. "Middleton," he said at length, "if I had been in your place I should have let my niece pay my workpeople with that money. . . . I tell you I would . . . and I would have given God thanks, as she did. If I had held the views you do I would have considered I was spoiling the Egyptian."

"The God I worship, Stephen Truman," replied Mr. Middleton hotly, "wants no dirty money. He doesn't levy taxes on the devil for the revenue of His Kingdom."

"Are you sure of that? Does your God let the devil keep his money to buy arms against his King? The Jews refused the publicans' money, but Jesus didn't. Where do you find this God of yours?"

"I find Him where I have always found Him—in His own heaven, where there's no sympathy with the devil and his works."

"Aye," replied Mr. Truman, "that is so. You find Him in heaven. He is in the clouds. He is anywhere except in yourself. He is old oak, as I told you once before. You can hang Him up on a nail and take Him down and look at the outside of Him; but you've never seen inside of Him in your life . . . I tell you you never have. He was on the

nail when you were a boy, and He's the same God on the same nail yet . . . I tell you He is the same old oak."

"I'm giving you plenty of licence, Truman," interrupted Mr. Middleton sternly; "I know you are ill and I don't want to excite you or to say anything that would do you harm; but there are limits to one's toleration, and I don't know how long I shall stand it without exploding."

"Good heavens, man," returned Mr. Truman, with an approach to irritation which he soon laughed away; "I could wish you no better fate. An explosion would do you good . . . confound it, it would be your salvation. Only it must be violent. It must shatter your prejudices and open your understanding, and release the real God within you who is chained up behind the bars of your traditions. . . . . I say it must do all this; and then you may go down on your knees and thank God you have begun to live.'

Mr. Middleton frowned. "Can you thank God, Truman, for what His will has brought you to? If so, you can begin to teach me; not before."

"There you go again," said Truman half-irritably. "It was God's will, I suppose, and not somebody's carelessness, that the bridge was rotten? I tell you I don't thank Him for it, and He doesn't expect me to do so. He's more sorry for me than you are and I won't insult Him by making Him responsible for some man's neglect—not I."

"Well, that's where we differ," said Mr. Middleton loftily. "I daresay it sounds heartless, but these mysterious dispensations of Providence are meant for discipline. God sends you into the river for some wise end of His own, and He's sending me into the Valley of Humiliation in the same way; and if you're a wise man you'll try to find out what His purpose is, as I do."

"I know, I know," said Mr. Truman wearily. "It's the old well-worn formula, and I don't blame you. You make your own God and endow Him with your own attributes,

and grieve the real God by your hardness of heart. I can't think what you make of Him who was made flesh and dwelt among us, for if illness and infirmity are meant for discipline He interfered with Providence every time He came in contact with the sick."

Mr. Middleton became thoughtful, but he was so afraid of pitfalls that he dare not leave the beaten track he had followed for years.

"If I wasn't sure that my trouble was God's will I should despair," he said. "It's the only rope I have to cling to. You may talk all night but you won't convince me that I'm not being tried in the furnace of affliction, and I'll not pour water on to the flames out of the devil's watering-can. God knows I'm weak enough sometimes, but His grace is sufficient for me. Nobody sides with me; nobody understands; but He does, and that's enough for me."

Mr. Truman looked at him and held out his hand. "Yes, that's enough," he said.

CHAPTER XXXI

MARY BREAKS DOWN

I CAN never forget the last day of that eventful November. Even though rain had fallen for several hours, so that in the deep channels at the side of the road the water raced along like a mill stream, the highway from Bexleigh to Brier Dene was not unattractive. True, the flowers were gone and the winter birds had found shelter, but the bare and crooked bushes in the wood were fringed about their roots with grass; and the sodden leaves in various shades of yellow and brown lay thick between the trees or scattered like copper discs upon the pools that dotted the highway.

In Titania's Dell the Spirit of the Air had spread a grey blanket of damp over the rocks, and the ferns looked almost red as they bowed themselves in dank masses to the earth; whilst the tall, straight boles of the trees stood like blackened pillars supporting an invisible roof. Even Mary's fancy would hardly have pictured the fairies in residence there now; but at this time Mary's imagination was busy with bugbears, I fear, rather than fairies.

My thoughts were busy with her and also with Victoria, of whom I saw very little. It may have been unintentional on her part, but I had begun to wonder if she avoided me of set purpose, though she was so affectionate and sympathetic when we were together that I tried to hold the suspicion at arm's-length, as it would not be driven away. I was always telling myself that I loved her, which was very true; always

professing to close my ears to another voice that mocked me and told another story, and whose mockery was sweet.

My whole heart went out to Mary at this time: to the girl who was too high-spirited to let anyone see on her face the shadow of the cloud that hung over her spirits; who held her head high but not defiantly; who dressed in the evening with more than usual care (or so I thought), and sang the songs her uncle loved with as much abandon and as great confidence in her high notes as she had ever done.

No one else could handle Mr. Middleton so well. She knew exactly when it was wise to banter and when to console, or perhaps it would be better to say that she could tell when banter was the most suitable form of consolation. She went great lengths and took what seemed to me fearful risks in poking fun at her uncle's absurd and dangerous convictions, but it was never meaningless; and the end that crowned the work—the final caress when she said good-night—always sent the blood rushing madly through my veins. Her uncle's neck would be clasped in her arms; her rich brown hair would rest for a moment on his grey head; then her lips would be pressed to his, and as she stood erect and held him by his shoulders, gazing waggishly into his eyes, she would say:

"Poor old uncle! What a lot of worries he has, to be sure! But don't forget to reckon me among your blessings when you say your prayers."

That, or something like it, for Mr. Middleton; a demure "Good-night, Mr. Turner," for me, and she was away, leaving her uncle with sufficient wealth in his eyes to have cleared off the bank a dozen times over, if treasure of that kind had been convertible into the dross of earth.

Such were my thoughts as I walked rather wearily along the road, and I hardly noticed a bent old man who was toiling along in front of me until I came up to him and found that it was Seth. He had no umbrella, but the collar

of his short overcoat was turned up well over his neck, and he made good use of a substantial stick as he plodded on. He was astonished and apparently disconcerted when I accosted him.

"Nay, I'd a bit o' business i' t' town," he explained, "an' it's swallered up more time, like, nor I'd bargained for." I thought his unusual taciturnity was attributable to the weather, but I could not account for the half-hearted way in which he invited me to "look in" for a minute when we reached the cottage.

Mary was there. She and Susan were sitting side by side and the old woman was gently stroking the girl's hands as we entered, but at sight of Seth she raised herself with difficulty from her arm-chair and went towards him.

"Dear man alive!" she exclaimed. "Why, you're soppin' wet. Stop there on t' mat while you take your overcoat off, an' then off you go an' change your trousers."

"It *is* a bit soft outside, lass," said Seth, who had suddenly recovered his cheerfulness; "I could do wi' t' rain, Miss Mary, if it wasn't so wet. Now you sit you down, lass, an' I'll hang my coat up, an' I'd happen better change, as you say. It won't do for us both to 'ave t' rheumatics."

He disappeared, and in a moment or two his voice was heard from the other room, "Susan, where 'ave you put my things, lass?"

"Eh, deary me," said Susan, rising again and hobbling across the passage. "Now that is a mess. Whatever didn't you take your umberella for?"

Mary took advantage of their absence to ask me to walk home with her, as there was something she wanted to say; and we did not stay long after the old folk returned, for I was conscious all the time of an air of restraint and mystery which was very unusual and which made me vaguely uneasy. When Mary kissed Susan the old woman broke down completely and buried her head on the girl's shoulder,

"My dear lamb! my dear lamb!" she sobbed, again and again.

Seth's lip was trembling. "You mustn't fret, lass," he said anxiously. "You must put a brave face on it, Susan."

"I'm not frettin'," she managed to reply, though her tears continued. "Leastways, I'm only frettin' for David an' t' dear lamb."

The "dear lamb" forced herself to laugh.

"This is nonsense, Susan," she said. "Why, bless your life, uncle and I are going to be as happy as a pair of love-birds. You needn't fret for uncle, for there will be me to look after him and he will grow quite young and merry again, you'll see. If the very worst happens we shall have a nice little cottage somewhere with two big arm-chairs like these of yours; one for uncle and one for Seth when he comes to see us—or perhaps for Mr. Turner. And I shall buy a scarlet hearthrug, because nothing can look more cheerful than this of yours, and—oh, I don't know what besides, but it will be all so bright that uncle will never want to live anywhere else."

She spoke soothingly, with the sort of confident make-believe that might be used to comfort a distressed child, and the old woman brightened a little.

"So good-night, Susan; I shall be in again before long—perhaps to-morrow, who knows?"

The rain had ceased, and the moon was struggling to break through the clouds.

"Let us go by the fields," said Mary. "Neither of us minds the wet." And we went.

"Poor old Susan," she began, as soon as we were through the stile; "she has been asking Seth all sorts of questions, and has quite made up her mind that something will have to be done to save us from the workhouse. It was pathetic and yet I could have laughed at times. She

told me that she made Seth get on to his knees every night to ask the Lord to show them how they could help us. I suppose things are looking about as black as they can be ? "

I was forced to admit that they were pretty bad.

" Do you think they will make uncle bankrupt after all ? " she asked.

" Mr. Lowther is very stiff," I said sorrowfully. " It's quite possible that they may. They'll decide on Friday."

" Thank you," she said simply, " for being so frank about it. I would rather know. Now I've something to tell you. Do you know what Mr. Truman is proposing to do ? You'll be very much surprised. He has asked uncle to let him pay the workpeople their money back."

" Mr. Truman has ? " I gasped.

" Yes. He says he's as rich as Crœsus and will never feel it ; and oh ! you can't think how troubled I am again. Do you know, uncle won't let him do it. Isn't it sickening ? "

I made an impatient ejaculation, and she went on :

" I was in the room and heard all that was said. You would hardly have known Mr. Truman, he was so gentle and tactful. He said he would like to give the money outright, but if uncle objected to that he might regard it as a loan. He told uncle that he knew how worried we both were about it, especially as the workpeople have no security, and that it would make him feel that he was of some use in the world still if uncle would accept his offer. I could have hugged him ; and when uncle refused I thought I was going to faint."

I felt almost sick myself, and I was angry too. " He must be mad," I said. " He blocks every avenue of escape. Did he give his reasons ? "

" Yes," she replied. " He said he wasn't going to let Mr. Truman ruin himself for his sake, and that it was only shifting the obligation—not getting rid of it. Wasn't it unkind of him ? And he said the workpeople had his

promise to pay them and if they couldn't trust him they must be taught by suffering. Oh, it was all so senseless and—and heartbreaking; and I don't wonder that Mr. Truman lost his temper."

"He did lose it then?" I inquired.

"He got awfully cross. The doctor says it doesn't really do him any harm, because it's all on the surface, but I was frightened, and I begged uncle to leave him. But neither of them took any notice of me, and when I couldn't stand it any longer I came out of the room and asked Vic to go in. Mr. Truman was wild with uncle, and told him he would pay the money whether he had permission or not. He said he could and would do what he liked with his money and he would send for his lawyer to-morrow. Uncle was furious."

"What does it mean?" I said, more to myself than to her; and I sighed, too, for this anxiety had oppressed me like a nightmare.

"It's all pride," she answered in a low voice. "I never knew what 'stiff-necked' meant till now. And oh! Louis, it's wicked, don't you think? I see no difference between this and robbery, and I'm wretchedly unhappy. Uncle won't let God save him."

Her voice broke and she felt in her pocket for her handkerchief, and not finding it turned away her head. I knew that she was crying, and my real self pushed the bars aside again.

"Mary," I said. She had called me Louis unconsciously and I was reckless. "Mary! you mustn't give way. We will save your uncle yet. We will make him listen to reason —*I* will." I had not the faintest notion how this was to be done, but at that moment I felt quite capable of doing it. "Don't distress yourself. I will see to it." One of my arms was around her shoulder and my hand had sought hers. I had an impression later that her head had touched my

face for just a moment and that I had tried to stifle her sobs by a movement that was startlingly like an embrace. It was soon over, for Mary recovered herself and essayed to laugh—a feeble counterfeit.

"I can't dry my eyes," she said, "because I've left my handkerchief at Susan's."

Mine served very well for the purpose, and when I had seen her to the gate I retraced my steps along the field path, living over again every minute of the past half-hour and contradicting my judgment by thanking God for Mr. Middleton's folly which had paved the way for mine. Then I went to Seth's cottage in search of the missing handkerchief.

I knocked and raised the latch as was my custom, but the old folk did not hear me. The lamp was turned down and the fire was low in the grate. Seth was on his knees upon the rug, his arms were outstretched upon the open Bible in the chair, and his head was bowed. Susan sat near him; one hand was laid upon her husband's shoulder, with the other she held her handkerchief to her eyes. So they were linked together in prayer, and the old man's voice rose and fell in passionate pleading. I do not know what he said—my senses failed to grasp the meaning of the words: I doubt if they even caught them—but the pathos of it all swept over my soul like plaintive music. I bared my head and stepped stealthily backwards, closing the door behind me. The last object that caught my eye was a tin trunk underneath the table, stoutly corded.

CHAPTER XXXII

VICTORIA STARTLES MR. TRUMAN

AND now I must try to reconstruct a scene that was taking place in the guest-chamber at the Mill House at the very time that Mary and I were having our conversation in the fields. I do not think imagination will play too prominent a part, for my recollections are vivid and the story was told to me at different times by both the actors.

The doctor's prediction that Mr. Truman would not feel much pain had been fulfilled, and few patients could have been less exacting. When I call to mind what an active man he had been, even irritatingly restless, unable to keep still for more than a few moments at a time, this acquiescence in what it is customary to call God's will still seems to me nothing less than miraculous.

The fall that had broken his back, however, had by no means broken his spirit, and if his lower limbs were paralysed his temper was as mercurial as ever; yet his patience was so tinctured with cheerfulness that he became at this dreary time the radiating centre of hopefulness and courage.

Mr. Middleton quarrelled with him and went away refreshed; Mary caught the infection of his blithesomeness and felt rebuked for her occasional want of faith; in fact, the entire household revived. Often enough when the shadow of an impending calamity deepens over a house its inmates walk about with quiet footsteps, and speak in subdued tones as though misfortune were not far removed from

death; but now when actual misfortune lay upon the bed upstairs, and joked with its nurses, and bantered the maids, and even dared to laugh aloud in Mr. Middleton's presence, the ghost was laid; and though the cloud was there a few of the sun's rays shone through.

Mary indeed suspected that beneath the pleasant ripples on the surface the deeps of the man's nature had been stirred, and I know that I lived through the experience myself in thought—felt the pain of it, faced the problem it presented, and so understood and sympathised.

Victoria faced the problem too, and came to her own conclusions, and on this particular evening acted upon them.

She knew they would not be disturbed, for with characteristic decision she had made her plans, yet so skilfully that nobody was aware of any arrangement. Mr. Truman looked up at her with admiration as she stood by his bedside.

"How many weeks have gone by, Vic, since they brought me here? Is it weeks or months?"

"It's a little more than a fortnight, and you're progressing famously, so one-sixth of the time upon your bed has gone already; then come the cart and the fresh air."

"Do they really?" he said; "and you think the prospect pleases me? You think the go-cart has attractions for me?"

"Of course I do," said Victoria brightly. "It will have when I take you out in it. Besides, the go-cart leads to the go-alone."

"In a chair to be propelled by a wheel!" said Mr. Truman, not without bitterness. "Child, am I to look forward to the time when, Ixion-like, I shall be tied to a wheel in hell and kept there for ever? Is there any pleasure in a thought of that kind, think you?"

"No," replied Victoria, "there is none. If it's to be hell there can be no pleasure in it. I spoke too lightly."

"Hang it, Vic, you take me too seriously; you are altogether too literal. I do not doubt I shall do well enough. They say that even Ixion's wheel stopped at the playing of Orpheus, you remember. Why should I complain? Some Orpheus will come along at intervals, I do not doubt."

Victoria's heart began to beat faster, and she turned down the lamp and drew a chair close to the bed and sat facing him.

"Mr. Truman, I am going to be your Orpheus, and I will stop the wheel for you."

"Raise my head a trifle, Vic. Thanks; that is better. I can see you now. And you shall listen to me. Deuce take it, girl, I say I am going to speak to you very plainly."

"I will listen," said Victoria, "and I, too, am going to speak plainly, and you shall listen."

"Now, by all the gods, if this is not too much! The pupil will teach the master, and the master, forsooth, must needs listen. A pest upon these college airs, Vic!"

"We are no longer master and pupil," she replied firmly. "We are friends, and mutually dependent on each other. You need me and you must hear what I have to say."

Mr. Truman frowned. "You shall at least hear me first, Vic. My age entitles me to the first word, and I will have it. Do you think your hints have been wasted upon me? Have my wits been prostrate as well as my body? I tell you, child, they're as nimble as ever. You shan't lose your life for my sake."

Victoria's lips were compressed and she was looking at him steadily.

"Take your eyes off mine," he said, as if annoyed. "You're not a cobra to fascinate me before you send out your fangs, and I won't be fascinated. I say again you shan't lose your life for my sake."

Victoria's lips opened. "I don't propose to do so," she said, and closed them again.

"It's confounded nonsense, Vic . . . it's unutterably absurd. You've got a good post and a congenial one, and Heaven only knows what you might get; and you'll chuck everything away to become nurse to a cripple. There is no law to compel me, and I WON'T HAVE IT."

Victoria's eyes were still on him and he grew irritated. "Will you take your eyes off mine?" he said.

"Mr. Truman, I must speak to you and you must listen," she said firmly. "It's true that I have thrown out hints and I'm glad that you've understood them. I want to speak quite plainly and you mustn't misunderstand me. I'm not emotional and you know it; and I'm not impulsive."

"You're a dashed sight too quixotic."

"I'm not quixotic, either. I'm acting on my judgment, and what I'm going to propose is best for both of us. I won't go back to London."

"I say you shall go back," Mr. Truman broke in with some excitement.

"I won't go back," continued Victoria, "unless I'm driven there; and if I'm driven the blows will be cruel and they will hurt. I can bear pain, as you can; but your pain hasn't been received at the hands of a friend, as mine would be."

"Hang it, Vic——"

"No, hear me out. It isn't easy for me to say what is on my mind and you must let me unburden myself now. I owe my happiness to you. I don't forget Mr. Middleton's generosity, but the biggest debt is due to you. I can never be happy again unless I try to repay that debt——"

"Stop a moment. There's no reason why my tongue should be tied. You can't repay this debt you speak of by making me your debtor. Why should you force an unwelcome obligation on me, Vic, and call it a repayment?"

"Then we won't speak of debt and obligation. I'll

cloak my words, if that will please you, but the facts will be there. Your body will always be helpless, more or less, but your intelligence will remain. You will still do good work, but your usefulness will be crippled. You must be dependent upon someone: why shouldn't you depend on me? Now just think——"

Mr. Truman interrupted her again. "'Just think,' do you say? Do you know that I've spent hours in thought when my eyes were closed, and you and others deemed me asleep? Think! haven't my thoughts run riot at times, and again gripped me so tightly that I could have screamed with pain? Child, you needn't bid me think."

"I know," said Victoria. "I'm a woman, and I've known all along."

"And knowing, pitied me."

"What if I did? I do pity you. I both pity you and am proud of you."

He looked into her eyes and saw tears there, and now he did not speak.

Victoria was silent for a moment or two before she continued:

"It's you, Mr. Truman, who pity me. And you're not fair to me or you would let me stay with you—not as your nurse, though I would willingly be that, but as your secretary and helper. Who could help you as I can? Who knows your mind as I know it? God knows I wouldn't boast, but there is no other who can do for you what I will do. And if need be I can support myself and you. I don't know what means you have and I don't ask you to tell me, but I know my own powers and I know that there's plenty of work that we can do together."

"For Heaven's sake, Vic, stop the flow of your speech for a moment or two, or you'll make a fool of me," he interrupted. "You're making me into a confounded old woman. Now let me say a word. I don't deny that you

could help me as no one else could, but I don't need your support, though I thank you from my heart for the offer of it. But, child, it can't be. Henceforth I must always have servants, always have a nurse. You are no child, though I give you that name, and you know well enough that I shall always need a nurse. And I won't have a house full of women. . . . I couldn't, Vic."

"Then I'll be your nurse and secretary too. I'm strong—what woman is stronger? I will learn, and learn quickly, how I ought to handle you; and when your brain grows tired with your body I will be brain for you. You mustn't refuse me."

"Vic, I tell you I must. Why do you force me to speak plainly? Can't you see that I couldn't bear it?"

"You couldn't bear it?"

"I couldn't bear it, I tell you. You'll give me pity, you'll give me brain; you'll repay me, forsooth, with service; but it isn't enough. I simply couldn't bear it."

"But what more could I do? I don't understand."

"How should you understand? You think you know me . . . you think you've read my soul, but you have eyes that don't see. You are blind."

The blood rushed to Victoria's face, then left it again, and she went white to the lips.

"I haven't dared to see," she said; "and I suppose you won't speak more plainly still, and I'm ashamed to do it, but I must. If you won't let me be your nurse or your secretary, will you let me be your wife?" She covered her face with her hands as she said it, and turned away.

. . . . .

"Louis," said Mr. Truman when he told me the story, "you'll believe me when I say that I hadn't meant to make her do it. But I had grown to love the girl—how could I help it? and if I hadn't broken my back I'd have made her love me. I told her so, and I told her that I was fifty-

three—old enough to be her father—and that I wouldn't let her sacrifice herself; that I wouldn't let her be chained to a log—and what do you think she said?"

I waited, and such a look of love and tenderness came into his eyes as may often be seen in a woman but rarely in a man.

"She said there would be no chains; that she would be bound to me by love and sympathy and kindred tastes, and that it was the only happiness she looked forward to in life; that if I refused her I should make her unutterably wretched. And—and she kissed me, Louis."

My heart was throbbing and I could not speak. I had no words: my thoughts ran here and there like frightened sheep.

"I struggled, Louis," Mr. Truman continued; "I fought hard, but it was no use. I made her swear that it was true—that only I could make her happy. And she swore it, solemnly."

Still I did not speak, and he sighed. He was another Truman now.

"Have I done wrong?" he asked in a voice that vibrated with emotion. "Am I a cad? a coward? O God! but she swore it was true."

CHAPTER XXXIII

MARY RECEIVES A LETTER

I HAD just raised my head and was about to speak when Mary entered.

"Do you very much mind if I interrupt you?" she asked. "I want to laugh and cry at the same time and I shall get to be hysterical unless somebody tells me what to do."

We both looked at her in astonishment. Victoria was lying down and Mr. Middleton was not indoors. The nurse was having her supper downstairs and was of no use as a confidante. Mary was plainly excited, and it was natural to connect her condition with the open letter that she held in her hand.

She laid it on the bed in front of Mr. Truman and we read it together. The original, faded and yellow, and very shaky about the creases, is before me as I write:

"DEAR MISS MARY,

"This is hoping it finds you well as it leaves us at present. also your uncle david and that you will soon get over all your troubles. and susan says that weeping may indure for a night but joy cometh in the Morning which we both hope it will. we have been thinking a good deal latly about leaving Brier dene. susans rumatiks has been bad and wev considerd to go to a nece of susans wheir ther will be a woman to look after Her. so we are going in morning and we shant want the cotage any Longer nor the

money your uncle david fasened on us. so wev considerd to leve it to you becaus it ought to stay in your uncle davids famly and we have as much money as will last us nicly. and susan says she hopes you wont mind looking after the bits of Furnitur becaus ther wont be room for them at jane elens and the money is thirty shilling every week and it wont come in any longer after were both dead but baring susans rumatiks were likly to live a long Time if the lord wils. And susan says she isnt fretin only about your Uncle david and she will be very happy with jane elen and there are three childern. so if you will see mr stocks the loyer in kirgate he will give you the papers and you will have to sine your Name where he tells you but ther is nothing to pay becaus i made that all right and it wasnt much. and will you tell your uncle david that we shall alwus thank him for all he has done for us and we often think about the winpres. but susan says the lords ways is past finding out but it will all come right in the end. so with love to you and your uncle david and susan says how is mr trewman no more at present

"your old friends

"SUSAN and SETH HALSTEAD.

"P.S. susan says you will alwus be her dear Lam and ther is a bit of cole in the coleplace."

I turned to Mary when I had read it. "Surely they haven't gone," I said.

"They have gone," she replied. "Marshall tells me he found the house closed when he called there to-night."

Then I remembered the corded trunk and told them of it.

"Uncle David will find them and make them come back, of course," said Mary; "but aren't they just the sweetest and dearest old people on earth? And you see they can't possibly have saved much, because I know they had nothing at all when uncle pensioned them. I was quite a child at

the time, but I remember distinctly how Aunt Ruth and Uncle David used to talk about them.

"Seth had lent all his savings to some young fellow who was starting in business, and the business went wrong, I think—at any rate Seth lost every penny. I'm not sure if it wasn't this Jane Ellen's husband; in any case it was the husband or lover of some relative, and if uncle hadn't made this provision for them they would have had a terribly hard struggle."

Mr. Truman's eyes were fixed on the sheet before him. "This letter braces me like mountain air, Mary," he said. "The old people know that if your uncle is made bankrupt things might be very unpleasant for you all. Everything might have to go to the hammer; your uncle would have to undergo public examination, and there would be no end of unpleasantness. Louis thinks it won't come to that; he says it would be madness; and yet, hang it, child, are not most business men mad? Are we not all, in fact, more or less afflicted in that way? From what I can make out of the wretched business your uncle has been mad; and he has made his bankers mad. He vexes his creditors, so I suppose they are mad too. There is nothing but madness in it; and yet your uncle—excuse me, child, I'm not speaking uncharitably—your uncle thinks it is all of God. And that drives me mad. We're a mad crowd. But whatever this mad meeting may do, my dear, they shall not turn you from your home . . . they shall not do that."

Mary came forward and kissed his brow, as she had often done before. "I'm not afraid," she said; "and I mustn't excite you, or they won't let me come again. But tell me, what must I do about Seth and Susan? They've evidently left the cottage, and, of course, they must come back again. But who is 'Jane Ellen' and where does she live?"

"You won't accept their gift then?"

"Mr. Truman! How can you ask?"

He smiled. "It's a nice cottage, and they say they will be very happy with Jane Ellen and the children."

"But you know better, Mr. Truman. You've read between the lines, as I have, and you know that they're heart-broken."

"Oh no, they are not. Sad, I daresay, but happy in their sadness. Is the man heart-broken who lays down his life for his friend? They see you and your uncle sitting in those high-backed chairs with your feet on that wonderful scarlet rug, and I tell you their old hearts dance. It won't be an unmixed pleasure when you bring them back . . . believe me, it won't. So you must act cautiously and you mustn't disclose their secret . . . you mustn't wound your old friends, Mary."

"I wouldn't wound them for the world."

"I'm sure you wouldn't. But you can do nothing to-night. We'll ask Stocks when he comes. Do you know I've sent to ask him to come to see me as I said I would? I think you must get your uncle to let Louis go to find the old folk and bring them back. He needn't go until after this meeting . . . there's no great hurry. By the way, Mary, has Vic told you that she's going to marry me?"

"What!" exclaimed Mary, who really did not believe that she had heard him aright.

"I daresay it strikes you like that, child," he said somewhat bitterly. "You look horrified enough, and I don't blame you. I've no doubt the world will consider me a selfish brute, and I'm not sure that it will be wrong. . . . I tell you we're as mad as the rest."

"Oh, Mr. Truman, you must forgive me. I wasn't horrified, but I was stunned and taken by surprise. I—I'd never dreamt of such a thing. But if you love each other——" Mary bent down again and kissed his forehead, and then sank on her knees by the bed and buried her face in the pillow.

"I know, child; I was a fool to tell you so suddenly; it was thoughtless of me. But you'll reconcile yourself to the thought by and bye. I've loved her for a long time . . . somehow she seemed to belong to me, and she's older than her years; I tell you, Mary, she's twenty years older than you are."

"And she——?" Mary hesitated.

"Yes, she loves me too. I don't know why she should, but God knows I haven't tried to force her will. I must always be a fallen trunk, but she swears she won't be happy away from me."

"Dear old Vic," said Mary. "Oh, I'm so surprised and so very, very glad. But oh, how sorry I am that you can't be well and strong again. Why should so much sorrow be mixed with our joy?"

"Nobody knows. But sorrow needn't be bitter. We often drop our own gall into the cup. I'm a cranky old bachelor, Mary, as full of crotchets as any man; but she accepts the conditions and I'll do my best to make her happy."

The lawyer came the next day and had a lengthy interview with Mr. Truman, and when he came down he asked to see Mr. Middleton and his niece. He was an undersized, middle-aged man, with a thick dark beard, and a manner of speaking that was a mixture of the brisk and the confidential. Victoria rose as he entered, and he whispered a word or two as she passed that brought the colour to her cheeks; then he shook hands with Mary and her uncle and drew his chair up to the table.

"You're having a rough time, Mr. Middleton, just now, but you'll pull through all right; you'll pull through all right. We lawyers can look on these things with equanimity."

Mr. Middleton had been out of sorts since the interview with Mr. Truman, and the man's off-hand manner irritated him.

"I daresay you can," he said shortly. "It doesn't ordinarily require much grace to carry other people's burdens, and still less to tell them how to carry them themselves."

"No, no, quite so," replied the lawyer absently, as he drew a number of papers from his bag; "but you've some good friends, Mr. Middleton; more, I daresay, than you're aware of."

"I'm glad to hear it," was the answer. "I've been finding lately how scarce they are and of what poor quality. However, we needn't discuss that. My niece has told me about this daft business of Seth Halstead's: in fact, I've read the letter. Let Mr. Stocks see it, Mary."

The lawyer read it through very deliberately and said, "It does the good people credit, I'm sure. Now I just want to say that I told the old gentleman as plainly as I could that it wasn't at all necessary to act so precipitately. I informed myself of the situation and I explained it to him, but apparently he and his good wife had made up their minds, and I had no option but to follow their instructions. The cottage is made over to Mary Everard—the name is Everard, I think?—I have the title deeds here; and the amount of the pension will be paid over to her regularly. There are, of course, one or two formalities to be gone through and——"

"I don't think we need trouble about them at present," said Mr. Middleton; "what we want to know is where these people have gone to."

"That information my client withheld from me."

"So I concluded from his letter, but what I am asking you now is if you know."

The lawyer smiled. "Well, you won't be surprised to hear that I anticipated this question and took certain steps. Your old servant, my client, is a very good-hearted fellow indeed, but there are many men who are much less simple.

I say that without offence, of course. I asked him on what day he was leaving, and he was considerate enough to furnish the information and to name the train. So I sent a clerk to the station this morning and found that he booked to Barnsley, and his luggage was also addressed to that destination."

"To Barnsley? Well, Mr. Stocks, my niece and I are much obliged to you, and I needn't ask you to keep this transaction to yourself. Gentlemen of your profession, I know, are not in the habit of revealing secrets. We shall find Seth and Susan Halstead and bring them quietly back again, and these papers of yours may, of course, be destroyed."

"Or shall we say they needn't be completed? I'm naturally not at all surprised, Mr. Middleton. As a matter of fact, Miss Everard's name doesn't yet appear, as our old friend couldn't recall it, and could refer to her only as 'Miss Mary.' Then I may take these papers back for the present?" He glanced inquiringly at Mary.

Mary smiled. "Certainly you may," she said.

"Well, now, there's another matter," said Mr. Stocks. "Our mutual friend, Mr. Truman, who I am sorry to see has sustained such a serious injury, is very desirous of fixing up the matter that he discussed with you, and——"

Mr. Middleton interrupted him. "I may as well tell you that I've been thinking that matter over, and though it goes against the grain I've made up my mind to accept the offer, which I believe was kindly meant, on one consideration only. A proper agreement must be drawn up, and the loan must bear reasonable interest."

"A very natural suggestion," said Mr. Stocks, "and one that I didn't overlook; but on that point our friend's instructions are definite and he is absolutely inexorable. There is to be neither paper nor interest."

"Then I won't have it."

"I hope you won't go so far. You see, my client could have paid off these various sums anonymously, but he prefers to be perfectly open. All the same, he's made up his mind that they shall be paid; and—ahem!—I perhaps needn't point out that he is himself a very determined man."

"I see," said Mr. Middleton sourly; "your client can force this obligation on me?"

"Only in that case," assented the lawyer, "there would be no question of repayment. It would come as from an anonymous donor."

"Uncle, dear, dear uncle!" said Mary, rising and going to his side; "don't refuse this kindness. Think how happy it will make us all, and Mr. Truman as much as any. For my sake, uncle!"

He looked down into her pleading eyes and the hard look relaxed. He rose and paced the room for some minutes in silence. "Very well," he said at length. "I suppose it's all my beastly pride, but my stomach turns at it. However, I'm very grateful to your client."

He went up to Mary. "It's on your account, Moll," he said. "I've yielded for your sake, but I shall pay it back all the same." And he kissed her on the lips.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"HE TRUSTED IN GOD"

MR. MIDDLETON accompanied the lawyer to the station at Bexleigh and there dismissed Marshall. "I'm going to walk home," he said. "Tell Miss Mary she needn't wait up if I'm not in by half-past ten."

"You'll 'appen not be going into t' woods?" inquired the man rather anxiously. "Miss Mary 'll be uneasy till she sees you back."

Mr. Middleton looked up at him sharply, but there was something in the coachman's eyes that disarmed irritation. It was not disrespect he saw there, but friendly anxiety.

"Very well," he said. "You needn't be afraid that I shall throw myself into the river. I'm seeing this thing through, Marshall. Tell Miss Mary I'll not be late."

The man drove off and Mr. Middleton followed him slowly down the main street of the quaint little country town; and seeing a ragged child standing beneath a street lamp his thoughts leaped back twelve years to the night when he had first met Victoria. She had been standing under a lamp, and in rags.

He laid his hand upon the girl's head. "What do they call you, lassie?" he inquired.

"Maggie," replied the child shyly.

"Maggie what?"

"Maggie Stubbs."

"Would you like some sweets, Maggie Stubbs?"

The child nodded.

"Then come with me and I'll buy you some."

The child put her hand in his and they went down the street together until they came to a confectioner's shop, where he allowed her to make her own selection.

The woman who served him smiled. "Poor little mite," she said; "it's few enough sweets Maggie ever sees."

He bade her be a good girl, patted her on the head, and went his way. "She reminded me of Vic," was all he said to himself by way of explanation.

He crossed the river and began to climb the road through the wood, and suddenly the pains of Sheol gat hold of him. Night was about him; darkness, thick darkness was before him like a wall, and it wrapped the trees on either hand in its embrace so that the recesses of the wood were scarcely indicated. Above his head the twigs and branches of elm and ash and sycamore formed a lattice-work of blackness, through which could be seen heavy masses of black clouds slowly drifting across a black sky. It was dry but not frosty, and black water gurgled down the runnels at the foot of the black walls; and the bushes that fringed them, and the very ferns that carpeted the wood were black.

They would not have been so black to Mary. She would have seen the delicate shades of grey and green that lurked within the blackness; but to her uncle it was blackness, sombre and unrelieved. Under circumstances like his a man need not be a poet or dreamer to read parables in Nature. The man whose mental outlook is gloomy, whose thoughts are black, finds tongues in trees and sermons in stones; and the trees speak bitterness and the stones preach suffering. Mr. Middleton saw in Nature the reflection of his own mood: darkness covered the earth and gross darkness his own soul; and the quietude of Nature brought him no peace, but rather turmoil.

What did the morrow hold for him? What new indignity

awaited him? He had held his head high amid the storm so far. He had returned the glances of his business acquaintances fearlessly: if they had stared at him he had returned the stare. Why not? he was still able to pay twenty shillings in the pound! Sometimes as he had passed he had imagined he heard the covert sneer and the only half-suppressed laugh, and he had held his head all the higher. Let them laugh! He had not lost his integrity if he had lost his money. "They laugh best who laugh last," and he, David Middleton, was still to be reckoned with. Some of these low curs would be cringing about his legs again before long!

And now suppose vindictiveness—for such he considered it—should be carried to an extreme and he should be made bankrupt: what then? It might come to that; his lawyer had admitted it, and he no longer tried to persuade himself that it was past belief. It was not Lowther, the bank manager; it was not the mass of his creditors; it was Satan against David Middleton: and who could set a limit to the fiendish malignity of the devil?

He left the shelter of the woods and reached the open country, but found no relief there. The fields were black, and the great stretch of sky that now spread before him was one vast pall of black, with great bundles of black thrown down upon it to make the darkness darker. He suddenly realised that he had been hoping to find some ray of light in the sky and had been disappointed; and he closed his teeth, and with his chin set Nature at defiance.

Very good: if that was Nature's reply he would go through with it. "I'll begin again at sixty-three," he said to himself. "I've held my head high so far and I'll keep it up in the Bankruptcy Court, and I hope the beggars won't get two shillings in the pound. Serve 'em right for letting the devil make a tool of 'em. But if they and their master think this is going to break David Middleton's spirit they are wrong, that's all. I'll let 'em see."

When he came to Rehoboth he found the chapel feebly illuminated and heard the sound of singing, and he stepped inside the vestibule, again not realising what he did. The united choirs of the three chapels were practising *The Messiah* for a Christmas concert; and as Mr. Middleton cautiously pushed open the swing door they were just finishing a chorus.

When he found that the chapel was in darkness save for the gas-jets in the choir he slipped, unnoticed, into the back pew where the high wooden screen cast a deep shadow; and the organ began again. Then a tenor voice rang out the words:

"All they that see him laugh him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying . . ."

With a great roar the basses came in:

"He trusted in God that He would deliver him; let Him deliver him, if He delight in him."

Mr. Middleton's heart stood still for a second or two, then began to thump so violently as to make itself heard as well as felt. What was this that had happened to him? Was Satan not only in the wood and the darkness outside but had he driven him and followed him into the very House of God? Was he so full of devilry that, not content with overthrowing and abasing him, he must needs trample upon him at the foot of the altar itself?

From the other end of the room came the volume of mocking sound:

'Let Him deliver him, if He delight in him."

The unhappy man sat down with his feet stretched out against the boards of the pew in front and his hands tightly gripping the seat beneath him.

It was true. He deserved to be delivered. God ought to

deliver him. He had trusted in God all the way through, and had served Him faithfully all his life. Who had given of his substance more liberally than he? Who had been more zealous in God's cause? Who more insistent on His claims? "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts," he said to himself again and again; "why doesn't He stretch out His hand and confound my enemies?"

There came the answering roar:

"He trusted in God that He would deliver him; let Him deliver him, if He delight in him."

"Yes, let Him deliver me, if He delight in me," he said between his teeth. Why should the devil triumph? Why should the enemy have cause to blaspheme? Had not God said that the rivers should not overflow and the fire should not burn His servants? And was not he His servant? What had he done that this horror of dense darkness should come upon him? Why was not God faithful to His promises?

In one great culminating shout of triumphant malice the words rang out:

"Let Him deliver him, if He delight in him."

Mr. Middleton fell upon his knees in the pew and buried his head in the cushion, and in that moment the waves and billows of God went over him. He heard as in a dream the voice of one of his own workpeople rise up in lamentation:

"Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto His Sorrow. . ."

and it seemed to him that One who pitied, but was helpless, was standing far back in the darkness unable to draw near.

He continued to kneel and to groan out formless and inarticulate prayers until a clear and steady voice burst upon his ear, with a note of calm assurance that poured oil upon the troubled waters of his soul. Distressed as he was, he

recognised it at once as Lizzie Nelson's, and the throbbing of his heart abated:

"But Thou didst not leave his soul in hell."

He drank in every word and the groaning ceased; and when the last notes of the organ had died away and the choir burst into the triumphant chorus, "Lift up your heads," he rose to his feet and went out into the night.

He walked back up the street with his head in the air, but there was no longer defiance on his face, but peace. He knew now that it was God and not Satan who had turned him from his path and sent him into the little sanctuary, and he stepped out with all his old confidence. He even laughed to himself as he walked along.

"You've got through the valley now, David," he said; "you'll get along all right. You had forgotten the Winepress, old chap, but you'll tread out the last grape like a man if God wills."

He dismissed the morrow from his mind, almost without effort, and climbed the hill like a boy of ten. When he turned into the lane that led deviously down to the Upper Mill he met a villager, whom he greeted with such hearty frankness that the man stared after him in surprise. "He must ha' pulled through," the man muttered to himself.

Mr. Middleton swung along. Surely there was a crispness in the air that had not been there before! Surely the cold breath of heaven was good! How black the trees looked in front of him! Why should they not be black? It was the hour of blackness; it was night now, but the dawn was not many hours distant. He paused and looked across the meadows on his left. How black they were, and how forbidding the long belt of trees away yonder in the middle distance!

And even as he looked one of the black heaps of cloud shattered as though cloven with an archangel's sword, and there burst forth a flood of silvery light. It poured over the

sky, and the funeral pall sparkled with gems like the resplendent robe of an Eastern monarch. It poured over the earth, and the bare twigs of the sombre trees shimmered as with the dust of stars.

Then, sailing majestic into the widening brightness, the moon came like the Queen of Night into her spacious palace. And the winds who are her servants swept back the curtains to the right hand and to the left, and the firmament glittered with lustrous lamps. The meadows, no longer grey and barren, became a sea of glass; and beyond the black trees with their glistening crests the hills were bathed in translucent haze, ethereal, indescribable, like the celestial hills of prophetic vision.

David Middleton, looking upon it, feared neither man nor devil. "The King of Glory has come in," he said.

He met me lower down the lane, and putting his arm through mine took me with him to the Mill House. "I've been through my Gethsemane, Louis," he said; and he opened his heart to me.

CHAPTER XXXV

SATAN'S TRUMP CARD

MR. MIDDLETON met his creditors the next day as cheerily as if it had been a meeting of shareholders with a big dividend in prospect. The note of obstinacy was missing from his voice; the sparkle had returned to his eye; and although his face was grey and careworn it had lost much of its hardness.

All the same there was no subservience in his manner. He might have been the chairman, with a secret and gratifying announcement in the breast-pocket of his coat, instead of the debtor who was there to receive final sentence. He shook hands, cordially enough, with Mr. Lowther, and showed himself so eminently reasonable that the meeting terminated in less than an hour on an arrangement that satisfied everybody. He had demonstrated his ability to pay all his creditors in full, and they cheerfully granted him the time and facilities he asked for.

He spent the remainder of the afternoon in his town office, discussing the new situation first with Tillotson and me and later with me alone.

"Well," he said, as the cashier closed the door behind him, "that's over, thank God, Louis. It's turned out better than it might have done, but I was quite prepared to go through with it. I would have trodden the road to the far end," he continued. "However, that hasn't been required of me. Now we've got to pull together, and get the chestnuts out of the fire."

"We will certainly do that," I said. "We must set to work and clear off the remainder of the stock and fit up for the fancy trade with all speed. You've no objection, I hope?"

He was like a schoolboy. "I leave it with you, Louis. You're well able to manage it, my boy. You've been a treasure during this rough time, and I'm proud of you."

I flushed a little. "I've done nothing out of the way, sir," I replied; "nothing that it hasn't been a pleasure to do."

"Is this business just your line, Louis?" he continued, eyeing me rather doubtfully; "I remember Tom saying just after you came that you were a dreamer, but that you would make your own way if it ever was made. I've wondered sometimes since whether you've missed your way, and wouldn't have done better to have followed Victoria's lead."

I shook my head. "Vic is ambitious, Mr. Middleton, and I'm not—at any rate in the same way. As a livelihood this seems to me as good as any other. It is full of interest: every hour of the day has its own attractions, and I'm quite happy in the work. I fancy I'm more or less dreamy still, but I don't think it has proved a drawback."

"Mr. Truman seems to think your talents are being wasted."

"Yes, I know," I said, smiling. "He thinks I ought to have a booth on Parnassus; but I tell him I can only climb the hill in my spare time. I had rather turn out good cloth than bad poetry; and I imagine I can serve other people better in that way, too. I'm in no hurry, either. Sometimes life seems to promise other opportunities, but I'm content to wait."

"Well, you shall help me to make things spin," he said briskly. "By the way, Louis, what do you think of this mad business of Vic's?" He looked at me searchingly.

"It stunned me at first," I stammered. "The thought had never entered my head. You see, he's quite old. Vic had never hinted at such a thing to me."

"He is fifty-three," said Mr. Middleton; "ten years younger than I am, and crippled for life. I'm sorry for Vic—and for you."

"Mr. Middleton," I said with an effort that sent the blood bounding to my face, "I'm awfully fond of Vic, but—but she has known for some time now that she hadn't the first place in my thoughts. I was prepared to be loyal—please believe that; but somehow she had found out how matters stood, and she told me plainly she wouldn't marry me. But I never suspected that she loved Mr. Truman.

"I see," said my master, whose eyes had widened considerably; "so there's been a little love romance going on under my eyes and I never saw it. Do I happen to know the other member of this interesting quartette?"

I was very much afraid, but it was neck or nothing now, and I told him. I was perfectly open, and did not conceal the fact that no word of love had ever passed between us. It was a very boyish statement, I believe, but perhaps none the worse for that.

He looked hard at me for a long time after I had finished, but I am sure he did not see me.

"So it's Mary, is it?" he said at length. "The fat would have been in the fire, I can tell you, my boy, if her aunt had been alive. You've taken my breath this time. Have you any reason to suppose that Mary loves you?"

What could I say? I felt certain in my heart that my love was returned, but I had no other assurance. "I have never spoken to her, sir. I've tried not to think about it. I can't answer for her. May I ask her?"

I could not read the expression on his face, but there was no harshness in his voice as he replied:

"I don't know. I won't say you mustn't. I must think

about it and keep my eyes open. Mind you, if her happiness should happen to be bound up in this I shan't stand in the way. I've no exaggerated notions of rank and so on, but her welfare means everything to me. However, you've done right to tell me, and I'll have a word with you again in a day or two. There are lots of fellows I should like worse. But now look here," he continued, changing the subject with characteristic abruptness, "to-morrow is Saturday. You must go over to Barnsley and find the Halsteads, and arrange for them to come back. Stay until Monday, if necessary, but don't come back without finding them."

My heart was bounding. "Very well," I said; "and before I go, what about the insurance? You will let me run over to the 'Reliable' office and get a covering note? I've been uneasy for weeks and we must have the mills insured now."

"Yes, we must insure them now. I wasn't going to settle up whilst the sword hung over my head, but we'll get on with it now. But I'm not going to give in without one more struggle. I won't; simply because it isn't right. It's just a piece of high-handed imposition, and I'll have a fight for it if I've to yield in the end. We've been unprotected a month; it isn't likely that anything will happen to-day. Write Jamieson to come to see me on Monday, and I'll get it settled."

I returned to my duties with a lighter heart than I had had for many weeks, and Mr. Middleton went down to Brier Dene and made the announcement that brought satisfaction to all his workpeople. To all, that is, except Sam Lightfoot, who was grievously disappointed to learn that his master's head was out of the noose.

In the Mill House there were smiles, and tears mingled with the smiles, though Mr. Truman endeavoured to conceal his gratification by quarrelling with his host on the subject

of Providence. Mr. Middleton, however, refused to be drawn into a serious discussion, and his final words silenced his eccentric friend:

"Now look here, Truman, you think you know all about it, but I'm *sure* I do. I've trodden the path; I've been nearly to the end, and I would have gone the whole distance if it had been required of me. I will yet. Mary once asked me if I could tread the Way of the Winepress, and whatever you may say, I've trodden it. I'm not boasting about it. I very nearly failed at the end; but I've had grace given me to go through with it."

"Confound it, Middleton," said the younger man; "you're as hard to move as the pyramids . . . I tell you reason is wasted on you."

Saturday night came and I had not returned. A stiff breeze was blowing from the east, and the night was cold and suggestive of snow or sleet. Mr. Middleton waited up until he knew there was no possibility of my arrival and then went to bed and at once fell asleep. He was awakened by a knock upon his door soon after midnight. "Get up, please," said the nurse quietly; "the sky beyond the trees is red. We fear there is a fire in the village."

He dressed quickly and went into Truman's room. "Good heavens! It must be the Valley Mill," he exclaimed. "Don't wake Mary. I must be off."

Even as he left the house messengers came running up confirming his fears.

"Ride into Bexleigh for the engines at once," he said.

"They're off, sir, ten minutes sin'," one of the men replied; "an' we've told 'em to knock 'em up at Bexla' post-office to see if they'll telegraph to Broadbeck. They'll be 'ere afore t' Bexla' brigade if they'll come."

Eagerly they ran forward, and across the fields from every direction other black forms were hurrying as well. Dense clouds of smoke, lit up now and then by a lurid

glow, were being driven over the trees across the valley; and the men pressed onwards. Soon they turned the last bend and could look across the wide space of fields upon the scene of destruction in the valley below. It was already a wonderful and awesome spectacle. The mill was three storeys high, and flames were bursting from almost every window of the second floor and from many of the others. As window-pane after window-pane burst with the heat the smoke belched through and was carried down into the yard or up into the air at the will of the wind. Behind and above the mill the thick trees stood like a black wall against the sky; but here and there a network of twigs or the outline of a trunk had caught the glare, and it looked as if some giant hand was tracing fantastic designs upon the wall in vivid strokes of vermilion and gold.

Mr. Middleton took in the situation at a glance and slackened his pace. "It's all up, lads," he said. "No power on earth can save it. It will be all chips and scrap before any fire brigade can get here. How on earth has it got on fire like that?"

The men looked at each other. "They say Sam Lightfoot was prowlin' about t' yard after ten o'clock as drunk as a lord," said one significantly.

The men continued to run, and their master followed less quickly, for his thoughts were heavy. So this was Satan's trump card! This was his last devilish move! He had merely left him for a season; rested awhile to give his prey a sense of security ere he made his final spring! It was he, was it, who had influenced him to reject the proposal and to put off the insurance for a few days longer? Very well; then he would foil him in the end. He should not gloat over him as one who gains the victory, nor should he tempt him to curse his God. No, no, he had nearly fallen once; he would not slip again. "Yea, though he slay me," he repeated to himself, "yet will I trust in Him."

He could hear the shouting now; he could see men, and women too, passing up buckets of water from the brook, and he caught the hiss of the feeble stream and choked back a despairing laugh at the sad futility of it. His heart beat violently, but he began to run again, and found others running silently alongside of him.

He had reached the end of the lane now and saw the crowd in front shouting, gesticulating, blocking the narrow way. From the mill yard came the roar as of gigantic furnaces: the mighty, terrible roar of the monster who has snapped his chains and given himself up to mad destruction. The heads and shoulders of the crowd were outlined in lurid light, and the stables and outbuildings beyond shone bright amid the rolling columns of smoke that beat against them. Great tongues of flame shot out from the windows and reddened the upturned faces of the men and women who worked or watched.

Mr. Middleton forced his way through to the space which the village policeman had with difficulty kept clear, and then stood transfixed as he saw what it was that caused the crowd to shout and turn their faces upwards. There were no windows on the gable end of the mill, but there were four large crane doors, one above the other. Three of these were closed, but the one at the very top of the building was open, and at this door a man was standing against a background of yellow light, wringing his hands in terror. At the foot of the wall several men were holding an outstretched blanket and exhorting him to jump.

"Who is he?" asked Mr. Middleton of Joss, who came hurrying up. "How did he get there?"

"It's Sam Lightfoot," replied Joss; "and 'e knows best how 'e got there. It's 'im 'at's set t' mill afire. I'll bet a 'underd pounds to a penny 'e's fired it when he wor drunk, an' then gone to sleep an' woke up to find 'e couldn't get out. T' second floor's ablaze from end to end."

"Where's your ladder? quick, quick, man," shouted Mr. Middleton; "don't you see he daren't jump? He'd break his neck if he did, as likely as not. Have you tried the staircase?"

"T' staircase is gone, an' t' ladder won't reach by many a foot," said the man; and a dozen other voices volunteered explanations of what had been attempted. Other ladders had been sent for, but they had not arrived.

"Bring out the dray!" roared Mr. Middleton; "do you hear me? fetch the dray at once, some of you."

A dozen men ran to obey his order and the dray was dragged down and placed at the foot of the wall.

"Put the ladder on it," he commanded.

"It's no use, Mr. Middleton," said Joss; "you can't make it reach, choose what you do."

"Put it on, I tell you," he thundered.

Again the men obeyed, but it did not even reach the third door and the crowd groaned.

"Why can't he lower himself by the crane rope?" asked Mr. Middleton. "Surely the fool isn't too drunk for that."

"He's sober enough now," said Joss; "but t' crane rope is burnt. A few feet of it fell down just afore you come up."

"Where is it? Pass it here and be quick about it!"

The rope was brought him. It was some eight feet long, and he took it in his hand and moved towards the dray. Above, the flames were creeping nearer and nearer to the unhappy man, who was holding to the hand staple in the doorway and shrieking for help. At the far end of the mill the upper floor gave way and the machinery crashed down with a roar that was heard above the roar of the flames. Every moment the light at the man's back grew brighter.

Mr. Middleton moved forward and Joss seized him by the shoulder. "You shan't go, sir," he shouted. "It's madness. You can't reach 'im an' you'll only throw your

own life away. I tell ye we've tried. There'll be some more ladders 'ere in a toathri minutes."

"'Shan't'!" he roared, as he pushed the man from him. "'Shan't'! I'm master here yet, let me tell you. Two or three minutes more will be too late. Do you think I'm going to stand here and see a man roasted to death without lifting a finger to save him? Hold the ladder, some of you."

He climbed on to the dray and set his foot upon the first rung. Women sobbed and prayed, and men looked sullen and ashamed. With an oath Joss sprang upon the dray himself and laid hold of his master's tightly-buttoned coat.

"It's suicide," he shouted—for he must needs shout to make himself heard—"what's t' use o' throwin' yer life away for a scamp 'at's tried to ruin ye? I tell ye it's 'im 'at's set t' mill afire!"

Mr. Middleton turned round and pushed him back with his foot. "You damned cowards!" he said with angry emphasis; and climbed up the ladder.

The men who held it looked in each other's faces and spoke no word. Those in the crowd below held their breath as he climbed. The man in the doorway still clung to the staple, but fell upon his knees in the attitude of prayer.

With a terrific crash the roof went through at the farther end, and the flames leaped triumphantly to the sky and threw shower upon shower of glittering sparks to the earth and the stream. Burning chips and flaming scraps of waste fell into the brook with hissing sound; and still the firemen did not come.

Mr. Middleton stood as high as he could get, but nearly a man's length below the doorway of the second floor; and the door there was closed. Slowly, for it was unaccustomed exercise, he drew himself up on to the narrow ledge and seized the staple in the wall. He could stand now with

some security, and the crowd saw him lean out and shout to the man in the doorway ten or twelve feet above him.

Already the flames were licking the edges of the opening, and the watching crowd held its breath, whilst many covered their eyes with their hands. Those who looked saw Sam stretch down and reach the rope that his master flung him; they saw him fasten it to the staple, and gave a great shout as they realised that he was going to lower himself on to Mr. Middleton's shoulders. But the shout became a deep groan as a billow of smoke and flame poured from the opening at the top and hid Sam from their eyes; but when it cleared they saw him clinging with one hand to the still unburnt rope and with the other to the stone ledge on which a moment before he had been standing.

Mr. Middleton was leaning out as far as he could stretch, and he had a firm hold of the stout staple in the wall. With his other hand he guided the man's legs to his own shoulders and the crowd saw Sam let go his hold of the stone. It was not a moment too soon, for flames were now pouring out of the doorway, and again the curling smoke hid the men from the eyes of the anxious crowd. Something fell with a thud upon the dray: it was the remnant of the smouldering rope.

But Sam now stood by his master's side and a great roar of cheering burst from the throats of those below. The man's coat had been on fire, but he had removed it and flung it down, and he was now lowering himself on to the ladder with Mr. Middleton's help. A young man ran up and guided him from beneath.

Scarcely were his feet upon it than the roof fell in at the near end of the building, with the loud noise of terrific thunder-claps, bringing with it half the side of the mill; and the weight of masonry and machinery shook the ground in its fall like the vibration of an earthquake.

Sam and his terror-stricken helper slid and fell down the ladder, and the men upon the dray ran for their lives. As

they leaped to the ground the ladder overbalanced and Mr. Middleton was left helpless upon the ledge.

At the sight of the tottering walls the crowd had turned too, but the panic was soon over and the bravest of them quickly recovered. But the fierce heat kept them back and the smoke and sparks blinded them. It was plain, however, that the gable wall was still standing.

Before the men could rush forward there was a loud shout from the bridge and from the crowd of people in the roadway above, as the great headlights of a fire-engine were seen approaching. With mouths foaming, with bodies reeking with steam, the four horses pulled up at the bridge and a dozen helmeted figures ran quickly along the lane.

It was the Broadbeck brigade, which had covered the six miles of rough road in twenty-five minutes.

The long-expected ladders arrived at the same moment, and the firemen had them erected in a few seconds.

A couple of men then mounted to the ledge and found him they sought stretched out upon it, with his head and shoulders in the angle of the doorway; and they bore him gently to the ground and through the sobbing crowd to the inn upon the bridge.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN THE WINEPRESS

MY train had been delayed, but I was disinclined to stay overnight in Broadbeck, and some unaccountable impulse urged me to set off quickly for Brier Dene. The cold night air made walking easy and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, until the glow in the sky filled me with foreboding and caused me to run forward at top speed.

I arrived whilst Mr. Middleton was still endeavouring to reach Sam, and when I had helped to put him to bed in the inn I hastened to the Mill House. By this time the Bexleigh brigade had arrived and the Broadbeck men were preparing to leave, for the fire had done its worst, and the flames that still shot up from the jumbled mass of piled-up masonry and twisted ironwork hissed back a mocking defiance to the thin streams of water that the firemen played upon them. The broken shell of the building remained, and that was all. The gable still stood firm, though every doorway was empty save that where Mr. Middleton had found shelter, and there the iron door was still closed.

Mary and Victoria dressed quickly and we hurried to the inn, where in the darkened room Mr. Middleton was fighting with death—fighting quietly and with closed eyes against terrible odds; whilst Dr. Barker leaned his elbow on the bed and watched. He had done all that man could do and was without hope. Two hours later he was joined by a medical man from Broadbeck, and after a brief examination

and the exchange of a few sentences of question and reply the two watched together in silence.

In the parlour downstairs Victoria and Mary conversed in whispers, though there was none to hear until the landlady brought them tea, and dropped some blundering words of well-meant encouragement. I walked about outside, too heart-weary to know that my limbs ached and that I was physically spent; nursing thoughts that were bitter and fears that I dared not look in the face. Some man in uniform—whether constable or fireman I do not know—took me by the arm at last and made me go into the inn and rest. By that time grey dawn was slitting the darkness beyond the distant trees, but there was no rent in the gloom that shrouded the man who lay at the entrance to the Valley of Death in the darkened room upstairs.

The lamp was turned down in the parlour and the three of us sat in silence—waiting. Then the doctor came.

"There is no change," he said. "He breathes heavily but he is holding his own, and that is something. I must get back to Norrside now, but Hamilton will stop. You might like further advice. If so I will wire for anybody you like."

Victoria left soon after breakfast to relieve the nurse, and Mary fell asleep on the couch. Then a nurse came with the message that Dr. Barker had wired to Airlee for Sir Robert Simpson, and I went in search of Marshall and instructed him to meet the great man at Bexleigh at half-past one.

Once I went over to the couch and looked on Mary as she slept. Sadness was chiselled on every line of her sweet, pale face, and she was motionless as a sculptured effigy. My own heart almost stopped its beat as I saw how still she lay. Her lips just touched each other, but neither from them nor from her nostrils could I detect any sign of breathing, and I bent down my face until it almost touched her own in an agony of apprehension. Then I started back

as her breast heaved convulsively, and I suppose I disturbed her, though when she awoke my back was turned and I was at the window, muttering curses at my folly.

"Has anything happened?" she asked, entirely without confusion.

"No," I said, "except that the nurse has come, and your uncle has spoken. He whispered, 'The last grape,' and smiled when they raised his head."

She forced back her tears. "I suppose I could not see him?" she said.

"They want no one to see him just now," I said. "Dr. Hamilton thinks you ought to go out. Will you come home with me? It isn't far, and I'll tell them where we are to be found."

She shook her head. "Near as it is, it's too far. But would you mind taking me to the mill? I want to see the ledge where he lay, and I daren't go alone."

"There are crowds of people about," I replied. "They are pouring in from Bexleigh and the neighbouring villages, but the police are keeping the lane to the mill closed, and there is only Joss there and a few firemen."

We went out together and in a few minutes were looking upon the ruins. Joss came up and turned to me almost fiercely:

"That's Sam Lightfoot's work; an' choose what 'appens to the guv'nor that low scamp 'll live, an' he deserves to swing for this. 'E worn't worth savin', miss, an' I tell'd yer uncle so, an' did my best to 'old 'im back."

"Is Sam getting better, then?" I inquired.

"Gettin' better! Course he is. Yon sort is saved for t' 'angman. Barring a nasty place over one eye an' a gurt fright, he ails nowt. By what 'Tilda says he's etten 'is breakfast right enough, an' now 'e's slobberin' all over t' pilla, an' makin' t' women blubber an' all. I wish I'd chucked 'im into t' beck three week sin'."

He turned away and I followed him, excusing myself to Mary for a moment.

"This is a sad business, Joss, but you and I must keep things going. I shall see what can be done to-morrow, and I rely on you. There is Miss Everard to be considered, whatever happens, and we won't let the ship sink."

"I'm wi' ye," said Joss shortly. "This is ower big a job for me, but you're t' boss for t' time bein', an' what you say 'll be law as far as I'm concerned."

We gripped hands over it and I returned to Mary.

"There are a few things I want to tell you," I said. "Shall we sit on the wall by the beck? It isn't very cold, and we can almost see the door of the inn from there. No one will disturb us, I think."

She consented in silence, and we went a few yards along the lane and sat down together.

"I must tell you first of all," I said, "that I found 'Jane Ellen' with some difficulty, and the old people will come back in a day or two."

"Oh, how selfish I must appear!" she said, rousing herself as with an effort. "I had forgotten all about them. But tell me now."

"I don't wonder you forgot, but what there is to tell you shall hear later. It was rather affecting; but there are other things I want to say to you now."

I paused.

"I hope your uncle will recover," I continued hesitatingly, and very lamely. "He once made me promise to take care of you and your aunt if anything should happen to him, and I was so proud. It seemed unlikely enough at the time, but I gave him my word, and—well, you can rely on me."

One or two tears forced their way through her glistening lashes, but she did not speak and I continued:

"I've been thinking it all out during the night, and I felt

pretty bad at times, because the fire makes matters worse, and they were bad enough before. But I see my way now, and I shall call on Mr. Lowther to-morrow and find out what can be done. I'm young, of course, but I get on very well with the Committee, and—you'll trust me, won't you? and not think that it's all hopeless?"

She laid her hand upon my arm and pressed it, and strength flowed into me.

"I'll do everything I can for you—and your uncle. You have Vic and Mr. Truman, of course, but I hope you'll tell me if there's anything I can do; because—because——"

I did not dare at that moment to tell her all. It seemed like taking advantage of her; and I came to an awkward stop.

Again, however, I felt the gentle pressure on my arm, and though I was half afraid to look upon her face I knew that her eyes were brimming over with tears, and I turned my head quite away and as quickly turned it back again. My arm was touching hers, and I wondered whether the violent throbbing that I felt came from her heart or my own.

Then all scruples were swept aside as a great wave of emotion burst over me. She looked so wan and pitiful, so much in need of comfort, so much "alone" that I longed to clasp her in my arms, and my soul would not be silenced.

"Mary," I said, "I love you. If it's wrong to tell you now, forgive me, but I can't keep it back any longer. I've tried, but I can't. I love you—oh! Mary, I love you till it *hurts!*"

She could scarcely have gone whiter, but she breathed more heavily, and a few more tears escaped unchecked. She was trembling, too, and her eyes were cast upon the ground.

There were crowds upon the highroad a couple of hundred yards or so across the fields, and curious eyes might perchance be peeping at us from the screen of trees that

sheltered the lane; but I never gave them a thought, but took the hand that was nearest me in mine and pressed it; and still she did not speak.

"Mary dear," I said, "I've hardly dared to hope—you are so far above me, I've felt sometimes that I was just a big fool to think of such a thing, but how could I help it when you were always so sweet and good to me? But if I've made a mistake——"

Did I really feel a slight pressure of the hand that had rested unresistingly in mine, or was it imagination only? At any rate it fired my blood. I forgot everything I was about to say, everything except my great love, and I said:

"You do love me. I feel it; I know it! Oh, Mary, dear Mary, tell me, tell me that you love me!"

Then at last her eyes sought mine and the tears were already drying on her cheeks. "Yes, I do love you," she said, quite simply, and if the words were low they were clear and musical, "and I'm glad you've told me."

What I should have said and done if Marshall had not appeared at that moment I do not know. For a long time I was undecided whether I owed him a grudge or gratitude, but from some points of view it cannot be disputed that his arrival was timely. He looked hard at us and I thought the light of understanding came into his eyes. At any rate he walked quickly away as soon as he had told us that the landlady had dinner ready and that he must be off to Bexleigh.

We had dinner together, though that had not been in the programme. Mother came down to see what had happened to me and we tried to force her to remain, but without success. "You'll vally my room more nor my comp'ny," she said. "I won't start wi' being in t' road, anyway." And argument was useless.

The Airlee doctor arrived in due course and spoke

equivocally of recovery and resignation. There was absolutely nothing to be done that had not been already tried.

"You are not a relation, I understand?" he said, as he drew on his gloves, with one foot on the step of the victoria. "Well, now, I should say the odds are against him; and even if he should recover I fear he will always bear about with him the legacy of those few dreadful moments."

I did not like Sir Robert. He spoke like a man who never loses sight of his own importance, and he dressed his sentences as carefully as a tradesman dresses his windows.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"One must not particularise at this stage," he replied complacently. "I only wish to warn you that there may be permanent ill results. I think I must be going now if I am to catch my train. The patient is in excellent hands. Good-bye."

. . . . .

Mr. Lowther arranged that I should meet the Committee on the afternoon of the following day, and without entering into details I may say that several members who had put down their morning paper with the feeling that the worst had happened went home in the evening assured that there would be no wreck after all, but that the weather-beaten vessel of which David Middleton was the stricken captain would yet be safely docked.

I was granted what was practically a free hand. "We've a good set of workpeople," I told them, "who will stick by me for Mr. Middleton's sake if for nothing else; and I've got a stake in the venture myself."

"Seeking a partnership, I suppose?" said Mr. Lowther, who was most affable. Indeed, my employer's magnanimity and misfortune had made everyone sympathetic.

"Well, yes," I replied, and I know I went red; "but

not the kind you were thinking of, probably. I am hoping to marry Mr. Middleton's niece."

There was general laughter at this; and one old gentleman who had always been very friendly to me—a wealthy man who prided himself on the purity of his Doric—thumped the table with his fist and said:

"That's reyt, lad. Tha's no 'casion to shame, an' it does tha credit to be ahtspokken. Tha shall hev my voat though tha'rt nowt bud a lad; an' my brass an' all if tha'rt fast for ony. An' tha can tell David 'at we all hope he'll come rahnd an' be no wahr; bud he wants to keep hissen aht o' t' gate, an' let his son-i'-law try his hand."

CHAPTER XXXVII

SMOOTH WATERS

FOR a long time it seemed likely that Mr. Middleton would "get aht o' t' gate" altogether, and it was not until February that it became certain that the grim ferryman was going to be disappointed of his passenger after all. April was well advanced before he was strong enough to hear, or indeed cared to learn, any particulars of his business affairs. By that time the ship which he had captained so long had reached calm waters and was proceeding smoothly; stripped, indeed, of much of its gear, and with the greater part of its cargo jettisoned, but a ship still, and capable of repair.

It was Marsden and his mill that provided me with a way out of our difficulties. I knew that the want of sufficient "hands" had not been our competitor's biggest trouble, but that the lack of capital had hampered him seriously from the start. As Joss put it, he had "baked a cake 'at wor ower big for him to eyt," and when I went to him and offered to rent a part of his machinery and premises I speedily discovered that he was willing to discuss terms. It ended in an amalgamation which inaugurated a period of ever-increasing prosperity; though that is another story, and one in which my personal interest was of only short duration.

Mr. Middleton was content with all that had been done and full of gratitude to everybody. His patience during the weary hours of convalescence rivalled that of Mr.

Truman, to whom he was now united by the link of a common experience. For a long time the doctors feared that he would lose his sight, and when they told him that it would always be dim and that he would never again be very strong he smiled. "What was it our friend Truman said? 'We will begin life again on that basis.' I'll try to show as good a spirit."

Victoria and Mr. Truman were married in the early autumn and continued to live in the Mill House, which our eccentric friend was loth to leave. "You no longer like it," he said to Mr. Middleton, "and I do. The greatest happiness of my life came to me here; and hang it, Middleton, I can't explain to you why, but I should like to live near that bridge."

I have often wondered if he ever told Sam Lightfoot what he knew, but I have not cared to ask him, and he has kept it secret if he did. I think, however, he did not, for Sam soon found work at Norrside and left a community of honest people that parted with him without regret and that found it hard to forgive his last offence. His own escape and his master's sacrifice brought about no reformation of character, and he continued a "wrong 'un" to the end. A curious accident apprised me of his illness and I made a long journey on purpose to see him; and if he was not exactly penitent he was sufficiently softened to tell me the story of his crime as I have related it, and of many others. He seemed relieved when he had thrown off the burden, though his manner said plainly that it was confession without contrition, and I am afraid he gloried in his moral infirmities.

Just before Truman's marriage Mr. Middleton removed to the neighbourhood of the Valley Mill, where there was a house with a sunny garden, screened from observation by a high wall. In that garden he gave Mary to me and put his heart into the gift, and I became the happiest of men.

For a few years after our marriage we lived together and mother kept house for us, helped and hindered by Marshall, who definitely refused to leave his master, though the carriage had to be dispensed with for a while, and wages were scant. "I've fratched with him so long," he explained to Seth, "that I'd as soon lose my head as lose my job; an' brass is nowt. I've what'll last my time." I am sure he would willingly have served his master for love alone, but that sacrifice was not required of him, though coin of that intangible kind passed freely between them.

Mr. Middleton outlived Mr. Baldwin Blunt by several years. How the ex-alderman managed it I do not know, but he contrived to keep up appearances to the end, and had the impudence (as I considered it) to drive over to condole with the son of his old friend in his affliction. Mr. Middleton received him courteously enough and listened to his quotations from Scripture without making any comment. They were left alone together just before the old man took his leave, and when he had gone Mr. Middleton gave a sigh of relief. "He won't come again," he said; and he never did.

All this is a long time ago, and the course of events carried me away from Brier Dene and into vastly different interests soon after Mr. Middleton's death. Here, therefore, my story ends.

"Not until you have told about our home-coming," says Mary. "The top stone should be put on with rejoicing, you know."

It was in the June of the year following our engagement that I brought home my bride to Brier Dene.

A brilliant day was drawing to its close and the shadows were long in the village street. Flags were flying from some of the cottage windows, and on the outside of Zion there was a scroll with the word "Welcome" in large gilt letters.

I remember how pleased we had been with our own country as we drove along. The pastures were golden in the sunlight; the holly-bushes sparkled as if newly polished; the branches of the great horse-chestnuts beat the sunshine down and left it in long stretches on the white roads, and when we reached the bridge we found the brook in its merriest mood, splashing and chattering on its way to the river. Overhead the larks were voicing their delight, and thrush, linnet, and yellow-hammer sang their several songs and filled the air with melody.

Before we reached the gate of Seth's cottage I heard the old man call out, "They're here, lass!" and as Marshall pulled up we saw Susan, seated in a rocking-chair on the path, with a bouquet of white roses on her lap.

There was a good deal of hugging and kissing before we were allowed to get away, and a good deal of cheering from the villagers, but we got home at last and found Victoria waiting for us at the gate. Before Marshall could jump down she had come forward and kissed us both heartily.

"Here, I say!" came a voice from the bath-chair within the gate. "Hang it, Middleton, if my wife isn't kissing another girl's husband! Those kisses belong to me. Come here, Mary, and give me them back—I say I must have them with interest."

Mr. Middleton had come forward. He was very white, and a stout stick acted as crutch to eyes that were now dim but merry as ever and much more sympathetic; and when the greetings were over he turned to Marshall.

"This is your doing, you rascal," he said briskly; "if it hadn't been for you this would never have happened."

"An' I take credit for it," said Marshall. "A lucky good job for some folk 'at I'd that much sense. All t'

same, I little thought when I first saw t' lad 'at I should ever live to see this day.

"An' you wasn't over civil, either," said mother, who had come up in time to hear his words; "but crusty cake is oft good inside, an' better nor 'alf-baked, anyway. An' for that matter there's crusts 'at's sweet enough if you've teeth to get through 'em."

I joined the two older men in the garden when Mary went indoors. Mr. Truman's chair was alongside the garden-seat, where Mr. Middleton sat with his hands on his stick. They took no notice of me.

"I feel stronger, Truman," said Mr. Middleton. "The day's events have not tired me overmuch, and they've brought me great satisfaction. I'm a happy man."

"So you ought to be," returned Mr. Truman. "So am I."

Mr. Middleton turned and looked at him.

"What's the matter?" inquired his friend.

"I was just thinking that you're a better Christian than I am, Truman."

"Well, as to that I don't know, but I imagine there are better men living than either of us—there's room for improvement in both, if you ask me."

"I don't regret the experiences of these last years," went on Mr. Middleton musingly. "I've gained more than I've lost. During those weary days when my eyes were bandaged I saw more clearly than I'd ever seen before. I believe I saw into the very heart of God, and I learned some useful lessons."

"I know," replied Mr. Truman; "God became flesh at last. You learned that it's the surrender of self that counts—that's the true test of loyalty. And you learned that pity is greater than pride—that the Way of the Winepress is the Way of Loving Sacrifice."

"Yes," came the murmured reply; "that is it. 'What

doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God ? ' "

"It's the same in the Revised Version," said Mr. Truman daringly.

Mr. Middleton smiled.

THE END

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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